

YOM KIPPUR 5774 – WIDENING THE CIRCLE

Rabbi Jen Feldman, Kehillah Synagogue

Growing up in a small town, I didn't get a lot of formative experience parallel parking while learning to drive. And so, even now whenever I'm in a more urban area...or even, dare I say, downtown Chapel Hill, I face the task with a mild fear of embarrassment. You've probably seen those people who take three passes to fit a compact car into a space big enough for a lunar landing – that would be me.

So it was a matter of modest personal triumph that, when driving with the kids on vacation in Canada, I parallel parked the rental car in one smooth motion. Sol and Hillel even let out a little cheer. And then, just as I was celebrating my victory, a man came rushing out into the street from the sidewalk, waving for my attention. I worried that perhaps my accomplishment was short-lived: maybe without realizing it I had scratched his car, or I had gracefully parallel-parked in a tow-away zone. But no. He was getting ready to leave the space a few cars ahead of me, and, since he still had a lot of time left on his meter, he went searching for someone to take his spot. He noticed that my meter was empty. Would I prefer to park in his place and have some free meter time after he pulled out? How kind, I thought. What was more, there was a crucial added bonus: The spot behind his was vacant, making parallel parking a breeze.

This may seem like a trivial story, but it touches on a broader issue that I have been wrestling with all year, and with greater urgency as the Days of Awe approached. What is the alchemy of generosity? Is there a formula for the combination of heart, soul and mind that can help us to be giving in attention and deed? Can it be learned? Nurtured? How can Judaism help us to lead more open-hearted and meaningful lives?

Each Yom Kippur we search ourselves, shining light into the darker parts of our soul, acknowledging our failings, feeling regret and vowing to do better. Our liturgy focuses our attention on our shortcomings, enumerating every flavor of fault for us in detail. On the other hand, our *machzor* pays surprisingly little attention to how we might go about improving ourselves. At this time of year, it is easy to be overwhelmed by how many times, and in how many ways we have fallen short of our goals. So, for these few moments, let us use our energies to explore how we can be more generous, open-hearted people.

As we try to tease out a Jewish perspective on generosity -- *Nedivut* in Hebrew -- we might start by distinguishing between *Nedivut* and *Tzedakah*. *Tzedakah* -- righteous giving, usually monetary -- is a mitzvah; that is, in Judaism it is an obligation. We give because what we have is not ours to hold onto forever, but rather a temporary gift on loan from God; and as partners with God we must steward our resources to create a more just and compassionate world. To engage in *Tzedakah*, in righteousness, literally means to do what is right. *Tzedakah* is action; in contrast, *Nedivut* is an orientation, a general approach to the world -- an outward focus that looks at the needs of others and prompts us to ask, how can we help? And while, in our consumer culture it seems natural to think of generosity as a call to reach into our pockets, that is only one of many, many possibilities. *Nedivut* is a readiness and eagerness to engage -- to give one's material support, and also one's attention, time, energy, skill, wisdom and compassion.

The first time we see the root of the Hebrew word for generosity, actually, is in the book of Exodus: the narrative of the gathering of donations for the construction of the *Mishkan*, the Sanctuary. God instructs Moses (Exodus 25:2): "Tell the Israelites to bring me an offering. You are to receive the offering for me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give." *Kol ish asher yidvenu libo*. "Yidvenu" is from the same Hebrew root as *nadiv* or *nedivut*.

Consider the transformation that this passage suggests: The Israelites have moved from being slaves, who have little control over their labor or indeed over their lives, to free souls who are capable of giving as their hearts dictate. As Rabbi Josh Feigelson points out "The culmination of the Exodus is not the crossing of the sea, and not even the revelation of the Torah. The culmination of the Exodus is in the building of the *Mishkan*, the empowerment of the powerless... to be generous..."

For the Israelites, generosity indicated freedom, growth, and transformation. And though we tend to focus on the effect of generosity on its recipients, Judaism teaches us that nurturing a generous spirit has a profound impact on the giver as well. In fact, another word linked to the root of generosity is *nediv* -- a noble. We are ennobled -- we become closer to the people we strive to be -- with every generous act.

This summer Sol and I went on adventure together -- our first big mother and son trip. We were traveling to Camp JRF, the Reconstructionist movement's summer camp, in the Poconos. We planned to fly to JFK, take the air train and a subway into the city for sightseeing, and hop on another train

into New Jersey to spend the night with my sister before driving out to Camp the next morning. These may sound like complicated logistics, but they involve the kinds of planning that Sol loves, with maps and route choices and as many modes of transportation as possible.

On the way to the subway from JFK, we packed ourselves like sardines into an airport elevator to go down to the air-train platform. I noticed a very young woman squeezed next to us with an Air Turkey tag on her luggage. Once we got out of the elevator, I pulled out our city map to help us get our bearings. The young woman, seeing the map, turned to us and very hesitantly, in broken English asked something like, “How go me, New York City?” We indicated the route on the map, but it was clear from the mixture of bewilderment and panic in her eyes that she could not follow our directions. So, I turned to Sol and said, “We have to be in New Jersey by 6PM. What do you say we help get her into the City and take her where she needs to go?” And I can’t tell you the excitement and joy with which Sol said yes, staying with her through Queens and into Manhattan, and ultimately taking her through Penn Station and to the front door of her hotel. The opportunity for Sol to be a guide, to help someone with his skills -- it was probably one of his favorite parts of the trip. Every person, young, old, adult, child – has gifts to give -- skills, knowledge, time, encouragement. Helping the young woman brought Sol joy, and in giving his time and skills with joy he grew, too.

Shakespeare wrote of mercy that “It is twice blessed: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.” Generosity toward others can create an even more powerful reciprocal effect: It leads those who benefit from it, and even those who observe it, to be more likely to be generous themselves. I am reminded of the Hasidic story of the difference between heaven and hell. In both places, there are tables groaning with platters of sumptuous food. In both places, too, peoples’ arms are rigid, unable to bend at elbows or wrists, and thus they cannot feed themselves.

Those in hell languish in hunger while a bountiful feast sits before them. But in heaven, people sit across from one another and feed each other.

If generosity is so intrinsically good for ourselves and others, why is it so hard? Why, I’ve asked myself, does it seem so natural to give less of myself – my time, attention and care -- rather than more? How many of us have feigned that we didn’t see or hear another so that we wouldn’t have to respond? How often may we have pretended to listen to someone on the phone when we were really typing an e-mail message? What are the obstacles that cause what

is called in Jewish ethical teaching “*tim tum ha-lev*,” the stopping up of our hearts that keeps us from spontaneous acts of generosity?

I won't endeavor to provide a comprehensive list of the obstacles we might face in becoming more generous people, but let us see if we can identify a few of the patterns of thinking and feeling that get in the way.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro sheds light on one major obstacle. He relates the Hasidic tale of a businessman who complained to his Rabbi that a competitor was robbing him of his livelihood. The rebbe responded to him:

“Have you ever noticed that when a horse goes to the river to drink, it strikes its hoof against the bank? Do you know why it does this?”

The man just stared at the rebbe, angry that he seemed to have missed the whole point of his complaint.

“I will tell you why,” the rebbe said. “When the horse bends its head close to the river to drink, it sees its face reflected in the water. Mistaking the reflection for another horse, it stomps on the ground to scare the other away and preserve the water for itself.

Now, you and I find such behavior silly. We know that the horse's fear is groundless, and that the river is capable of watering far more horses than just this one.”

Many people live, much like this horse, with a nearly automatic assumption of scarcity. We view life as a zero sum game. If I give more to others, or even allow others to take from the source, I will have less for me. I have to grab and guard what is mine lest it goes to someone else. And the more we respond to others and to the world this way, the more convinced we might become that it is true. When we begin to believe and act as though we have enough to share, we often find that we do. When our view of the world is rooted in the ultimate source of our life, in God – the river in the story -- our capacity for care, love, attention are not finite but abundant.

A second obstacle: Over the last several decades, our culture has increasingly encouraged us to focus on ourselves, in pursuit of individual perfection, rather than outward and toward communal good. In their challenging article, [The Gospel According to 'Me'](#), the philosopher Simon Critchley and psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster argue that the American dream has been transmuted to “Live Fully! Realize yourself! Be connected! Achieve well-being!” Now, I am a person who, in addition to prayer, strives to meditate daily, goes on regular walks alone in the woods, and tries to cultivate self-awareness and a mindful approach to living. I think these are good, and not

bad things to do. But Critchly and Webster sound the warning when “rather than being the by-product of some collective project, some upbuilding of the New Jerusalem, well-being is an end in itself.”

Their argument is that the connection with the self, the search to find and fulfill the “authentic self” has become the organizing principle of our lives, to the exclusion of a sense of shared destiny with others, practically forming its own religious system. Critchley and Webster contend:

Despite the frequent claim that we are living in a secular age defined by the death of God, many citizens in rich Western democracies have merely switched one notion of God for another — abandoning their singular, omnipotent (Christian or Judaic or whatever) deity reigning over all humankind and replacing it with a weak but all-pervasive idea of spirituality tied to a personal ethic of authenticity and a liturgy of inwardness....

Generosity requires a different orientation: outward rather than inward. This isn't always comfortable and, sadly, we are often out of practice. In our “me culture” of self-fulfillment Judaism consistently has a counter-culture message. A life worth living is not calculated by our possessions, and also not by our self-possession. It is defined instead by what we share, by a sense of ourselves as part of the web of inter-connectedness, by a joint search for meaning and holiness. Wholeness requires the balance found in the often-quoted words of the sage Hillel:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

And if I am only for myself, then what am I?

We live Jewish lives by the relationships we build with others, and through those relationships we feel our connection to the Sacred.

Sadly, when we do direct our thoughts toward others, we may run into a third obstacle to generosity: we may distance ourselves from others by judging them, assuming negative motives and looking for shortcomings.

The Rabbis cautioned:

“You should judge every person on the side of merit.”

In other words, generosity begins in our perceptions and assumptions, in the stories we tell about others in our minds. Do we assume the worst? Do we minimize our empathy? The modern sage, Mr. Rogers, carried in his pocket a quote from a social worker, “Frankly, there isn't anybody you couldn't learn to love once you've heard their story.”

When we are more generous in our minds with people, it can lead to a greater openness in ourselves and our own deeds – and others may respond to it as well. A story is told of the biblical Aaron who was known as the paradigm of a great peacemaker. The rabbis encouraged us to try to be like Aaron, who always judged people *b'chaf zechut*, generously on the side of merit. The story goes that once Aaron met someone who had quite a bad reputation for being hurtful to others. Aaron chose to greet him with respect and kindness. After he had left, the man thought to himself, “Aaron treats me so well and sees me as a decent person. I’d better mend my ways and live up to his expectations.”

One way to increase our generosity is to seek out our own role models. I want to give everyone a moment to think of someone you know who seems to have a natural ease in generosity. Someone whose natural kindness and openness of heart has impacted you in some way – perhaps through attention, or support, or helping you out during a difficult time. I know that in my own life when I am in the presence of these people my own behavior changes. I listen more. I’m more open hearted. It is almost as if the rules of the game of relating have changed. The rabbis said, “Find for yourself a friend, and acquire a teacher.” Seek these people out. Let them know they matter to you. Ask them what supports and motivates them to be more generous.

Cultivating an expansive attitude toward others and the world can also begin with practical exercises in awareness and action. Sasha Dichter, the founder of the Acumen Fund, that invests in entrepreneurial approaches to fight poverty, says that we teach our kids to say please and thank you by constantly reminding them to do it and reinforcing that they need to say it each time. If we use the same methods to become more generous, we are likely to internalize generous habits so that they feel easier and more natural. Dichter gave himself a challenge of not saying no to anyone – for thirty days.

I tried a somewhat less extreme measure: I spent the month of Elul trying to find three new opportunities for generosity each day. What happened? I wrote more thank you notes, I asked the staff at a retreat center their names and engaged more readily in conversation, I poured water and served others before I drank myself, I got home early so my husband could go to the gym, I held more doors. I found that my awareness during the simple acts of daily living shifted more to the world and the people outside of me. And at the end of the day, I was able to recognize the small ways in which I had been a better person. It was surprising to see how many opportunities there were once I began to look for them. Rabbi Alan Moranis speaks of a stream

clogged with pebbles. Each act of generosity clears pebbles away, making room for a freer flow of generosity and kindness. A more flexible, open and giving heart and soul.

As we move through the rituals of this Yom Kippur, each of us will remember times that we have fallen short of the mark during the past year. But during this period of introspection, may we also commit to turning our hearts and minds outward. May we find generous friends and teachers to guide us, and may we make it our practice each day to bring others into our circle of concern. Next year at this season, may we all find – though we will still surely have our faults – that in Fifty Seven Seventy Four we have become more open, more loving, more of a blessing in our own lives and the lives of others.

G'mar chatimah tovah! May it be a good sealing in the book of life. For those who are able, may it be a meaningful fast.