

## Carry it with You

Rabbi Jen Feldman, Kehillah Synagogue

Rosh Hashanah 5780

Since our earliest days, we have been a resilient people. The Book of Numbers describes in detail how our Israelite ancestors traveled in the wilderness through often hostile territories on their way to the Promised Land. Numbers 10:1-2 reads, “Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: Have two silver trumpets made: make them of hammered work. They shall serve you to summon the Congregation and to set the Encampments in motion.”

Sounds simple enough – the blasting of the horns alerted the people, who had been at rest, to come together, gather in their military formation around the ark, and resume their wilderness trek.

The esteemed 20th-century scholar, philosopher and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, though, read from this seemingly simple verse a profound lesson in the nature of community. He notes that there are two words to refer to the people in

these verses: The trumpets summon us first as an *edah* (congregation) and then as a *machaneh* (encampment). A *machaneh*, a military encampment, he writes, is organized around external threat and thrives on fear. When the threat is gone the *machaneh* dissolves. But we are also called to become an *edah* – a congregation. A congregation - a sacred community - organizes around its highest morals and values, its shared purpose and mission. An *edah* thrives on love.

Let me clarify here. When I speak of love, and when Rabbi Soloveitchik refers to a an *Edah* that thrives on love, we are not referring to the OKCupid variety. We are pointing not to romantic love but to *chesed* – often translated as lovingkindness or love as deed. *Chesed* is the very heart of Judaism – the ultimate goal of Jewish living and spirituality: To become more loving, generous and kind in not just our thoughts but our actions. To embody, in how we live our lives, our understanding that every person is created in the Divine image, that all of Creation is single, sacred, unified.

Regarding this, the Rabbis of the Talmud unpack a spiritual and theological conundrum. The Torah implores us in Deuteronomy, *Acharei Adonai Eloheychem Telechu*. After your God you shall walk. The prophet Micah implores us, as well, to walk humbly with God.

What on earth can this mean? How can mere humans “walk after God?” After all, the rabbis challenge, isn’t God described in Torah also as a “devouring fire” – all powerful, the source of all, the might to create and destroy, ultimately ungraspable by the human mind? We can not after all, see the face of God and live. Not exactly the easiest walking partner. How could one walk after that?

Their answer is a brilliant one. They answer: Just as God clothed the naked, so shall you clothe the naked. Just as God visits the sick, so too you should visit the sick. Just as God comforts mourners, so should you console the mourners. Just as God buries the dead, so too should you bury the dead.

Do you see what the rabbis have done here? In the words of Rabbi Shai Held, they have moved us from a God

whom we are to *worship* to a God we are able to *emulate*. They teach us that to live a Godly life, to live a life of holiness, to live the good life in Judaism is to emulate the attributes, the highest qualities we ascribe to God.

One rabbi in Talmud goes on to point out that the beginning and end of Torah are lovingkindness: In the beginning, God clothes Adam and Eve; in the end, God buries Moses. What does it mean when we say that something is there from beginning to end? From A to Z? It is a way of saying that it is the fullness, the very essence of that thing. The whole of Torah is *chesed*. Torah exists to help us cultivate lovingkindness.

You may say to me, Rabbi, this God stuff just doesn't speak to me. I don't believe in the God of the Bible, who stands outside the universe and runs everything. It's hard for me to sit through services every year and hear about the God who judges, rewards and punishes.

To this, I say: I'm glad you are with us this High Holidays and have found yourself in a Reconstructionist Synagogue

that embraces a range of theological approaches. Rabbi Harold Sculweiss, of blessed memory, a devoted student of Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, put it this way: He asked a class once to look at two columns of religious claims and to raise their hands for the column they could agree with.

In the first column, God is merciful. God is just. God is forgiving. God feeds the hungry. God cares for the sick. God raises the fallen. God protects the innocent. God punishes evil. In column Two: Extending mercy is Godly, Doing justice is Godly. Forgiving is Godly. Feeding the hungry is Godly. Healing the sick is Godly. Raising the fallen is Godly. Protecting the innocent is Godly.

A few people in his class raised their hands for the first column. The majority, though, raised their hands for the second. The difference between the columns was more than just syntax and grammar. Column B transformed the God idea from some being that is, in Schulweiss's words, "to be praised, petitioned and thanked" to an idea that could be

believable and personally actionable. It did not stop doubt and skepticism – after all these two are an integral part of a spiritual journey. But it reoriented people to “the role of faith, the posture of the believer and her/his relationship to such matters as the problem of evil, prayer, ethics, the self and community.” In the words of Kaplan, the test of a God idea is what it causes you to do, the difference it makes in the way you live.

But, as Rabbi Shai Held points out, there is another obstacle, more visceral and perhaps even more powerful than the theological one, that trips us up when we seek to lead a life of lovingkindness. Look at the template the Talmud gives us for how to make *chesed* real: clothe the naked, visit the sick, comfort the mourner, bury the dead. For many of us there is probably something on this list that, if we are honest with ourselves, frightens us.

Let me tell you a personal story. I was in my first year of Rabbinical school (almost 25 years ago) and my student job was to be a chaplain at the Philadelphia Geriatric Center. I felt

woefully inadequate for this work, afraid that I did not yet have enough knowledge or experience to help residents cope with their pain and loss. One quiet Thursday I was doing my round of visits at the Center's total care unit. I had just left the room of a woman who had suddenly, unexpectedly become gravely ill and was unconscious. The family was on their way for their weekly, routine visit, anticipating all to be fine. The nurse tried, but couldn't reach them; she then went back in the room to check on the resident.

I was standing in the hallway when the nurse came out to tell me that the woman had died. I was terrified. The family was on their way any minute. I called down to my supervisor expecting she would take over, but she couldn't be reached either.

What happened next was a bit of a blur. The elevator was arriving, and I heard a nurse say maybe it was the family. So, it is with great humility that I share this with you – I hid. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I hid. There was a wall and I just went behind it.

My brain began calculating how I could get out without being seen, giving my supervisor time to arrive.

Through my anxiety, I somehow heard the nurse approach the family as they entered the corridor from the elevator. A thought flashed through my head, “Jen, why are you behind this wall? Are you really hiding?”

Suddenly, something inside of me just turned. The force of my “inner turning” literally made my body pivot and face the family. My legs then took over. With my first step toward the family, I no longer felt my anxiety. I remember putting my hand on the daughter’s shoulder. Her words started pouring out – how much she loved her mother, how much she would miss her. I stayed with the family for a few hours until necessary arrangements could be made.

That day changed me because I learned a crucial lesson about trying to live a life of *chesed*. It is okay to feel fear. Carry it with you and do it anyway. Judaism asks us, in the words of Rabbi Shai Held, to be both compassionate and

tough on ourselves, to “...Learn to run toward the very places you are tempted to run away from.”

My fear, I told myself then, was rooted in concerns for my then-limited professional experience. But really I think at the root of it – at the root, perhaps, for many of us – is a fear of our own vulnerability, our own mortality, our own fear of illness, grief and loss. Awareness of this vulnerability – when we don’t run from it – can become a gift. We turn to each other awake to our common humanity. We are not in a posture of pity, or being above the person we are helping. Rather we are beside them, with them, our presence and acts of concern and care having the potential to bring comfort, healing and hope.

But acts of lovingkindness do even more than assist the ones we reach out to; they transform the one who gives. As Rabbi Jonthan Sacks points out, when we distribute money or share power, we end up with less. When we share *chesed* – love as deed – though, we grow in love and compassion.

And here's an even bigger idea: In a world which can, at times, seem suffused with suffering, hatred and violence, each act of *chesed* helps us tap into the power of goodness, grace and love in the world. Even in the most difficult times, we can act. Throughout our history as a people, we have worked to create communities that foster mutual care and love.

At the Kehillah the hub of our network of living as a community of *chesed* has been our Caring Committee, which takes care of the living, and our Chevra Kaddisha, our sacred burial society which tends to the needs of those who have died. In the past the efforts of the Caring Committee were anchored by just two individuals who for years worked with a small handful of dedicated volunteers.

As we grow as a community, we will grow our capacity. The more *chesed*, the more life. Rather than being in the hands of a few, *chesed* is something that all of us can be engaged in, making our community stronger and our lives richer.

This past spring, we gathered a brainstorming team to figure out how to weave *chesed* more broadly into the fabric of our Kehillah. This fall, we are inviting the whole congregation to take part in our new initiative called the Kehillah's Lovingkindness Circle. It is a model that other congregations have found to be both successful and sustainable: It allows us all to participate even amidst our very busy lives. I promise – together we can do this!

So here it is in brief: Each month, two people will be care coordinators. Over two dozen people have already stepped forward to share this sacred work, and we are always happy to welcome more. In the first year we'll be focusing on meals for people in need. Once care coordinators learn of a need, they'll create an online sign-up through the Lotsa Helping Hands website. Instead of an e-mail just being sent to a few people to do these acts of lovingkindness, the whole congregation will be given the opportunity to participate.

Don't like to cook? You can purchase a meal or drop off a meal made by another.

Like to cook, but don't know what to cook? Our website's Circle of Lovingkindness page will have recommended recipes waiting for you.

Not up for cooking or driving? We'll be sending *mazal tov* and get well cards – and you can help with that.

All you need to do to be ready to participate is go onto the Lotsa Helping Hands website and create a free account for yourself.

To make the sign-up process even easier – and because I am a true, 21<sup>st</sup>-century rabbi – I'll be posting a can't-be-missed instructional video on YouTube.

If each one of us commits to providing, purchasing or delivering a meal just one time each year, we will be creating an incredible circle of *chesed* here.

For those who are moved by reaching out in ways other than meals, this year I'll also be gathering folks interested in visiting the sick for training on the Jewish spiritual approach to this mitzvah, *Bikkur Cholim*. Our goal in year two is to

expand our Lovingkindness Circle to include providing these visits as well.

With all of us on board we will strengthen our Kehillah, weaving sacred bonds of lovingkindness that give our lives meaning and deep satisfaction, receiving even as we give. We will look with amazement at how much *chesed* happens in this community.

In our imperfect world, there are inevitably times when we are called to be a *machaneh* – an encampment. In the face of anti-Semitism, bigotry and hatred in all its forms, we link arms with our community partners and stand strong. At the same time -- at all times -- we are here to be a sacred congregation, an *Edah*. Each of us can contribute to make this a reality. As the psalmist said, *Olam chesed yibaneh* – the world will be built on lovingkindness. Together we will build this community, for ourselves and for those who follow us, on love. L'shanah tovah.