

Caring for the vulnerable

Kol Nidrei 2019

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The old man placed an order for one hamburger, French fries, and a drink.

He unwrapped the plain hamburger and carefully cut it in half, placing one half in front of his wife.

He then carefully counted out the French fries, dividing them into two piles and neatly placed one pile in front of his wife. He took a sip of the drink, his wife took a sip and then set the cup down between them. As he began to eat his few bites of hamburger, the people around them were looking over and whispering.

Obviously they were thinking, 'That poor old couple - all they can afford is one meal for the two of them.'

As the man began to eat his fries, a young man came to the table and politely offered to buy another meal for the old couple. The old man said, they were just fine - they were used to sharing everything.

People closer to the table noticed the little old lady hadn't eaten a bite. She sat there watching her husband eat and occasionally taking turns sipping the drink.

Again, the young man came over and begged them to let him buy another meal for them. This time the old woman said, 'No, thank you, we are used to sharing everything.'

Finally, as the old man finished and was wiping his face neatly with the napkin, the young man again came over to the little old lady who had yet to eat a single bite of food and asked 'What is it you are waiting for?'

She answered, "Teeth."

Many of us would readily share a plate of food, a sip of beverage, and perhaps even lip gloss but teeth, well, that may be a bit extreme. Nevertheless, the High Holy days are a time for open heartedness, caring, and sharing. Rabbi Kruspedai in the Talmud teaches that three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah. Those who are completely righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life. Those who are wicked are inscribed in the book of death. And those in between, all of us, are held in limbo until Yom Kippur when our fate is sealed. The rabbis use this teaching to implore us to reach higher, be better, and to scrutinize our deeds. We are supposed to see every single act as having cosmic significance in affixing our fate. Just one good deed can make all the difference.

In Judaism, we have concepts of being judged at the end of our lives, during the High Holy days, and even throughout the year. Whether you believe in an afterlife or not, though, what is consistent in our tradition, is that we are held accountable for all that we do. We are bidden to take responsibility not only for ourselves but for others. We are to do the best that we can. Now,

it's relatively easy to care for people we love, our children, parents, significant others, and friends. It's harder to care for a stranger, to care about someone we don't know or that can't do anything beneficial for us. It simply doesn't come naturally to be concerned about someone who is other than us or our group. This is why the Torah says in Exodus, "You shall not wrong nor oppress the stranger,

כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt."² In Leviticus, we are admonished, "The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens... for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."³ In Deuteronomy, it is stated, "For the Eternal your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing food and clothing — you too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."⁴

Now, I could keep sharing teachings of our Torah on this topic because the commandment to care for the stranger is mentioned more times than *any* other commandment in the Torah. We are reminded to look after the stranger no less than 36 times. Wow, that's more than honoring one's parents, loving God, keeping the Sabbath, or admonitions against killing or stealing.

There's a great teaching in the Talmud about Elijah and the leper. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi was standing at cave of mystical guru Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai when none other than Elijah the prophet appeared to him. Rabbi Joshua was so excited! Eliyahu haNavi! He immediately asked him, if he has a portion in the world to come, meaning, does he get to go to heaven? Elijah responded, "Yes, if God wills it." I can imagine a more definitive response but Rabbi Joshua is not disheartened. And so he asks the next question, "When will the messiah come?" I imagine there was a bit of silence as he eagerly awaited Elijah's response. The spirit of Elijah then says simply, "Go and ask him yourself." Rabbi Joshua is perplexed. "Ah, where is he?" Elijah counters, "At the entrance of Rome." Joshua takes in this astounding information. The Messiah is just outside the city but wait, there are lots of people hanging outside of Rome. Then he asks, "How will I recognize him?" The heavenly visitor explains, "He is sitting among the poor lepers; all of them untie their bandages all once and treat their sores. The Messiah, though, he only takes off his bandages separately and treats one sore at a time thinking that if he is wanted, he won't be delayed by having to affix all the bandages."

Rabbi Joshua must have half ran to the outskirts of Rome. He surveys the poor people sitting and lying down and studies them. Then, then, he sees him. One of the lepers is removing one of his bandages at a time. No one else is like him. Joshua approaches the unique leper. "Peace

unto you!” he exclaims in greeting. The poor man looks up and says, “Peace unto you, son of Levi.” He knows my name, Joshua thought. This is him! “Oh, when will you come?” The Messiah meets his eyes and says, “Today.”

Joshua must have skipped all the way home and shared the good news with everyone around him. I imagine him staying up late and finally falling asleep in his chair. The next morning he wakes up and is dismayed to hear of how a man was murdered and a neighbor robbed and that everything is the same. Dejectedly, he goes back up to the tomb of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai and has a vision of Elijah again. Elijah asks him what the Messiah said. Joshua said, “He spoke falsely to me. He said he could come today but he has not.” Elijah responds, “This is what he said to you, today, if you will hearken unto his voice.”

This teaching ends with that conclusion. Bizarre, isn't it? What does it mean to hearken unto his voice? Even more perplexing is, why is the messiah among the lepers on the outskirts of Rome? And what does it mean to listen to his voice? It begs us to ponder who is at the fringes of our society. Who are the people in need of assistance, protection, and care? Would you say the homeless or displaced? About those who are mentally ill? Refugees? Immigrants? LGBTQ? Is it the friendless child in school, the awkward teen, or the socially challenged neighbor?

I want to share with you some people I know who have chosen to care for the stranger. Meet my friend Ruth Lisha. She is a middle school math and science teacher at Franklin Classical Middle School in Long Beach. Ninety three percent of the diverse school population is eligible for free and reduced lunches. Well, last year she and a few teachers applied for a \$500 grant to help her students. When she asked her kids what they would do with one hundred dollars, she received requests from her students for Tupperware to keep out the roaches, food, socks, school supplies, air mattress, microwave, shoes (one 8th grader said he'd been wearing the same pair since 6th grade), art supplies, money to pay the electric bill, and even a vacuum cleaner. Can you imagine your kids asking for food containers or a vacuum cleaner?

Ruth read the kid's accounts of how their families purchased all of their food at the beginning of the month and when they ran out, they went hungry and so would go door to door within their neighborhood asking if they could join that family for dinner. One boy Joseph stated, “We do not have food in the fridge and my dad works really hard to keep us happy but sometimes his boss doesn't pay him well.” The grant wasn't enough and so Ruth and her colleagues set up an on line donor page last spring and ended up raising \$4000.00 and were able to help 36 families.

Ruth writes, “These young leaders of the future are very insightful and aware of their family's daily struggle to provide adequate nourishment for a family. It's moments and stories like these that remind us as educators to not take the influence we have over these young learners for

granted. Showing compassion, empathy, and grace through the struggles of life are valuable skills...”

One of the people in our community who cares about the stranger is Debbie Lelchuk. Debbie has a passion for social justice and concern for those on the fringe for our society. She has initiated a refugee Shabbat for two years at our synagogue where we get to know the personal plight of those who have come to our country in hopes of making a better life for themselves. For me, I know issues of immigration and border security can be very challenging. I do, though, feel a great pain in my heart when I hear of children forcibly being separated from family members, being warehoused or caged, and not even given adequate food or sanitation. I was hopeful when I saw Matt Paresky’s email requesting for us on line to contact our congressmen on this issue. When I read about lawyers arguing that sanitary and safe conditions for children doesn’t include toothbrushes, soap, and blankets, I was sickened. Judge Berson, wrote on behalf of the panel of judges, that, “Assuring that children eat enough edible food, drink clean water, are housed in hygienic facilities with sanitary bathrooms, have soap and toothpaste, and are not sleep-deprived are without doubt essential to the children’s safety.”⁵

Within Judaism, I am aware of no security or defense concerns that can justify this kind of treatment of people. When the Torah admonishes us to care for the stranger, there is no caveat provided there aren’t too many of them or how they came to be in our land. It is unconditional! Nachmanides, a Medieval, Spanish rabbi comments on Exodus in his commentary, “In my opinion, [God] is saying, do not oppress a stranger or wrong him [by] thinking that there is no one to save him from your hand, because you know that you were strangers in the Land of Egypt... You know that every stranger is disheartened and sighs and cries out, with eyes directed toward God. And God will have mercy on [the stranger] just as God had mercy on you, as it is written, "The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out...”⁶

I’d like to give you a third person who cares for others and that I look up to, Gloria Schwartz. While Gloria isn’t necessarily caring for strangers, she looks out for people in need of some extra TLC. She visits our older members, brings them sometimes a little nosh and a lot good cheer. I remember of hearing from the late Beverly Salibury how Gloria would even take her for manicures. When some of our older congregants described Gloria’s visits, for me, it felt like an angel had come to them. I am grateful for Gloria’s updates on the young and those who are mature with years. She tries to make our little ones during our Tot Shabbat feel special and puts on a fantastic oneg for the parents as well. Our confirmation students are treated to an exquisite dinner with Gloria. And she often will offer rides to some of seniors. Gloria is regularly looking

out for those who just need someone to care about them and she does. Through her big heart, Gloria notices people and helps them feel valued.

I am sure you can easily come up with people you know who go out of their way for others and try to make a difference. There is so much need out there. It can be overwhelming but

Rabbi Tarfon teaches that **לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְלָאכָה לְגַמֵּר**

It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it.”⁷

There’s a lot of work out there to do and there is no way any of us as an individual can fix all the wrongs of our society. Nevertheless, as Rabbi Tarfon teaches, we must still try and do our part. Given how many times we are admonished in Jewish tradition to look out for the stranger, I believe each of us has a responsibility to help and assist whether such a person is down the block, working in our office, learning our classroom, in our community, or at our border. Now, no one is going to ask you to share your dentures but we are all capable of showing some compassion, giving some time, and assisting. I guess what I am asking of you, today on Yom Kippur, is to open your heart to those who are on the outskirts, those who are most vulnerable, and to care. I believe if enough of us do so, we will hear the voice of the messiah, and we will usher in better times to come for all.

Notes:

1 https://www.reddit.com/r/Jokes/comments/8kkzir/sharing_is_caring/

2 Exodus 22:20

3 Leviticus19:34

4 Deuteronomy 10:18-19

5 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/15/us/migrant-children-toothbrushes-court.html>

6 Nachmanides on Exodus 22:20

7 Pirkei Avot 2:1