

Do Someone *an act of Hesed*

Yesterday, I spoke about how we need to muster faith during times of uncertainty. Today I want to speak about how we put our faith into action. Traditionally, we Jews enact faith through the doing of *mitzvot*. Our tradition calls upon us to find ways to concretize our faith by strengthening the bonds of the communities of which we are a part. Particularly during a time of disruption and uncertainty, we need to find concrete ways of manifesting our faith through our awareness of our responsibilities toward one another.

The person I want to offer as inspiration for this process is a rabbi who lived during a time of catastrophe and horror on a scale like no other—a man who lived the last few years of his life in the Warsaw Ghetto, and who was later transferred to a labor camp outside of Lublin, where he was murdered by the Nazis. His name was Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira—and he was known as the Piaseczno Rebbe, from the town in Poland where he was born. Later, he also became known as the Warsaw Ghetto Rabbi.

The Piaseczno Rebbe continued writing commentaries on the Torah portion during the entire time he was held captive in the Ghetto. He knew that he was unlikely to survive his ordeal, and so he managed to have his commentaries smuggled out of the Ghetto and buried before he was taken to the Trawniki Labor camp where he would eventually be murdered. Those transcripts were unearthed and discovered after the War. This past year I had the privilege of studying some of those Torah commentaries in *hevruta*—in a study partnership with my rabbinic

colleague Rabbi David Ackerman. The Piaseczno was a true spiritual genius—and the fact that he could write his commentaries in the midst of the chaos and death that surrounded him makes his work all the more remarkable.

One of the people who was most influenced by the Piaseczno Rebbe in the last century was Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach—a gifted Jewish musical composer and storyteller, but also a man who had a history of inappropriate behavior towards women. I want to share a story that Rabbi Carlebach tells about the Piaseczno Rebbe that is rich and beautiful, even as I understand that for many of you who are listening, Rabbi Carlebach's legacy may be a mixed one.

Rabbi Carlebach talks about the fact that prior to being rounded up and taken to the Warsaw Ghetto, the Piaseczno was well-known for the joy that he took in educating children. The Piaseczno was aware that secularization posed a threat to the future of Jewish life in Poland, and he wanted to nourish young Jewish children in the joys of *Yiddishkeit*. There were Torah scholars in Piaseczno who begged their Rebbe to study with them, but the Piaseczno Rebbe always prioritized teaching children. He would say to his adult students: "You'll make it without me. This child needs me." Unfortunately, only a few of the children who had learned with the Piaseczno Rebbe survived the War. But Rabbi Carlebach, who so yearned to hear teachings from students who had learned directly from the Piaseczno Rebbe, searched high and low to see if he could find one of those children who had learned from the man he considered the greatest rabbi of his generation.

And here's the story that Rabbi Carlebach tells about meeting one of the Piaseczno Rebbe's children—a story he first told in the 1980's. He writes: "A few years ago, I was walking on the Yarkon in Tel Aviv and I saw a man who was completely hunched over who was cleaning the streets. Sometimes, we are given a small gift of prophecy and our hearts tell us something. I had a feeling this person was special. He was so bent over. His face was very handsome, but every part of his body was disfigured. And I said to him, "Hey, *shalom aleichem* my friend." And he answered me in a very heavy Polish-Yiddish Hebrew, "*Aleichem shoolum.*" I said to him in Yiddish, "My sweet *Yiddele*, where are you from?" He said, "I'm from Piaseczno." I said "Piaseczno. Gevalt! Did you ever see Reb Kalonymus Kalman?"

"What do you mean, did I ever **see** him? I was a student in his yeshiva from the age of five to eleven. Then I was sent to Auschwitz for five years. I was eleven when I got there. They thought I was seventeen; I was so strong. They beat me up so much I never healed. That's why I look this way. I have nobody in the whole world, really nobody."

I said to him, "You know something--my whole life I have been waiting to meet one of the students of Reb Klonymus Kalman. Would you be so kind to give me over one of his teachings?"

He kept on sweeping the street, "You really think that after five years in Auschwitz, I remember the teachings?"

I said, “Yes--the words of the greatest of Rebbes penetrate your soul forever.”

He stopped sweeping. He looked at me and said, “Do you really want to know?”

He touched me so deeply, and although you shouldn't swear, I said to him, “I swear to you, and I mean it with all my heart, that whatever you tell me I shall tell all over the world.”

Now this street cleaner was a real *Hasidische Yid*, so he put the broom against a wall and went to wash his hands. And this is what he said: “There will never be a Shabbos like the ones by my holy master, my exalted Rebbe. Can you imagine--hundreds, sometimes thousands of young people dancing with the holy Rebbe in the middle. What a sight! Can you imagine the Rebbe making Kiddush sitting with hundreds of children with so much holiness? He gave over teachings between the fish and the soup, between the soup and the meat, between the meat and the dessert and after every teaching, he would always say, "*Kinderlach, taire kinderlach*, my most precious children remember: *Di greste zach in di velt ist, zu tun mit emetzin a tova*. Children, precious children, just remember the greatest thing in the world is to do for someone else *an act of Hesed*—to do for someone an act of kindness. "

“When I came to Auschwitz, I knew my whole family had been killed and I wanted to kill myself. Each time I was about to, I suddenly heard the Rebbe's

voice saying to me: 'Precious child, the greatest thing in the world is to do someone else *an act of Hesed*.' Do you know how many *acts of Hesed* you can do in Auschwitz late at night? People dying, people crying; nobody had the strength even to listen to their stories anymore. I would be up all night. A few weeks later I wanted to kill myself again but always at the last moment I'd hear my Rebbe's voice. Now I'm here in Tel Aviv, but believe me, I'm all alone, there are moments when I think I should end it all. Sometimes I even go into the sea until the water reaches my nose. Then suddenly I hear my Rebbe's voice again and I just can't permit myself to do it and I run back to the streets. Do you know how many *acts of kindness* you can do on the street?"

And this is how Rabbi Carlebach ends the story: "Listen to me, my beautiful friends, when the when the *Moshiach*—when the Messiah—finally arrives, all the holy people will come back to the world and the holy hunched over man, the holy street cleaner, will come back. He will clean the streets of the world. Do you know how he will clean the world? He will go from one corner of the world to the other and he will say, "*Yiddelach*, the greatest thing in the world is to do for someone else *an act of Hesed*."

The greatest thing in the world is to do for someone else *an act of Hesed*—an act of kindness. That was the teaching of the Rebbe who watched his whole world destroyed by the Nazis in World War II. No matter the circumstances, we can always do someone *an act of Hesed*.

And what about us? Could we not take that same teaching that emerged out of the death camps of the Nazis, and internalize that sense of obligation to one another, we who are living in a time—despite the pandemic—of relative ease and comfort? If, in the most cruel and inhumane circumstances imaginable, a Rebbe could teach his children that the greatest thing in life is to do for someone else *an act of Hesed*, then surely, we who have so much, shouldn't we be able to do each other some more *acts of kindness*? What can give us the motivation to be able to do these acts of *Hesed* for one another—even when some of us may feel overwhelmed by our own struggles?

We might start by thinking about all the *acts of Hesed* we have experienced over the last year and a half. Many of which may have started out as a job or a responsibility that a person had—but which went so far above what was required, that they became acts of *Hesed*. The people who were going to work each day to make sure that there was food in the supermarkets. The researchers who worked around the clock to develop vaccines that have literally saved our lives from this deadly virus. The health care workers who staffed our hospitals and tended to the most vulnerable. The teachers who went into their schools and taught children both in-person and online. Responsibilities in which so many put their own lives at risk in order to take care of the rest of us. So many *acts of Hesed* done for us—many of them by people whose names we do not know. Our entire lives were sustained over the past 18 months by an untold number of *acts of kindness* of which we were the recipients.

And think about the many *acts of Hesed* we did for one another. The people who were homebound who in this community mobilized to go grocery

shopping; the volunteers who helped our elders use technology that was unfamiliar; the members of the community who called one another to check on each other during the time when we could not gather together.

Let me not romanticize the backdrop. This was a year when the social fabric continued to fray; when the divisive politics continued to be played out; when the sense of shared sacrifice was often tested against those who did not want the government mandating health care policies. Yet amidst all the tumult and distrust, for the vast majority of us, the world was able to continue because so many people were willing to do for each other *an act of Hesed*.

When we are feeling demoralized, when we are feeling alone and afraid, when we are feeling that there is too much division, what can give us the motivation to be a force for good in the world—to find someone for whom we can do *an act of Hesed*? Let me share with you a teaching of the Piaseczno from his weekly Torah commentaries that I studied this year that might guide us. He writes that when times are tough, we feel “exiled” or distant from God, and these times are precisely when we feel the most powerful longing for God. (*Aish Kodesh on Shabbat Ha-Gadol*, 1941.) Here is what he means: when times are tough and we despair, and when we feel frightened about the world around us, we yearn for safety and hope.

But he goes on to say that when we “accept the yoke of the mitzvot”—when we accept our obligations to each other and to God—we grow in holiness. And when we do, it's as though God's own Self becomes greater and more active in the world, because in our spiritual growth, we become greater and more active

in the world. It is through our **obligations** to one another and our **commitment to serve** one another that we bring God's presence more fully into the world.

Living what he was living through, the Piaseczno Rebbe could easily have said: "There is no hope. The world is broken, and we are not safe; God has obviously abandoned us."

Instead, he wrote: "The world is broken, but that very brokenness arouses our yearning for a better world, and our yearning is the first step toward making it real." He taught: "We have to keep trying; we have to keep doing *mitzvot*; we have to keep trying to build a better world. Even in times of pain and fear. Even—and he was writing this in 1940—even when we're confined to home and "commerce is brought to a standstill and businesses are closed, God forbid." (Aish Kodesh on Beshalach, 1940.) If he could write those words in 1940, how much more so should we strive to affirm these words in our infinitely more secure circumstances.

But after a long period of time living in a world in which we have been both scared and afraid, where do we find the strength? For the Piaseczno Rebbe, we find it in God. God is the One who illuminates the way forward in times of darkness. That is why we say the words of Psalm 27 during this time leading up to—and throughout—this holy season: *Ka'vay el Adonai, hazak vi'ya'ahmetz li'beh'kha, vi'ka'vay el Adonai*: "Keep hope in the Holy One. Be strong and open your heart wide; keep hope in the Holy One of Blessing!"

This does not mean that we have to believe in a God who is going to come to our rescue and make everything ok. Lots of us don't believe in a God who is

going to step in and save us. But what we can believe is *that we are the hands of God* and that we can step in and make the suffering around us a little bit less difficult. As the psalmist says, we need to be strong, to open our hearts, and to keep hoping. When we realize that we are responsible for one another—when we see the language of *mitzvah* as the language of commanded responsibility—then we seek out others for whom we can do many, many *acts of Hesed*. Our mutual dependence manifests itself in our willingness both to take help from others when we need it; and to offer assistance when we have something that will make the path a little bit easier for someone else who is suffering.

That's what the Piaseczno was trying to teach as the Nazi death machine came closer and closer. Both our Jewish obligation—and our human calling—is to do something that makes life better for others. As we struggle to emerge from this pandemic that continues to make life painful and difficult for so many, the reminder of our mutual obligation to one another could not be more important.

Even at times when the world feels like it is spiraling out of control—it is at just such a time that the recognition of our mutual dependence is heightened. Like the Piaseczno teaches, in caring for one another, we can become for each other the light that illuminates the path through the darkness.

In this coming New Year, may we bring much light to the world through the many *acts of Hesed* that we do for one another.

Kein yi'he ratzon—So may it be—Shana Tova Tikateivu