

11 September 2018

D'VAR TORAH – ROSH HASHANAH DAY 2

Moshe went to the town's most successful lawyer for a donation and said, "Our research shows you earn over a million dollars a year yet you've never donated to the Jewish appeal! We'd love you to give back to your community". The lawyer thought for a moment. "Did your research show my mother has been seriously ill and has huge medical bills?" "No", mumbled Moshe. "Did your research show that my brother is blind and in a wheelchair, unable to support his wife and six children? Shocked Moshe, stared at the ground... "Did your research show that my sister's husband died three months ago leaving her penniless with a mortgage and three children?" Moshe, humiliated, murmured, "I had no idea..." "Well then... if I don't give any money to them, why should I give any to you?"

Now I am not soliciting your money for donations... that's for next week ☺... and I am not suggesting that this lawyer resembles anyone in this room... Oy vey... However, it is a fitting beginning to speak on renewal, Rosh Hashanah and the happiness that comes from doing for others...

Last year, I asked what we would be willing to sacrifice for our values... in creating a better world, just as Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, Isaac. I was going to sacrifice for the environment: train to work, shop less online - buy locally, use less packaging... It wasn't much and I was already an environmental warrior. I just had to do that little bit more...

But... It took ages to stop driving to work... it was cold, meant leaving earlier... reducing my online shopping was easy... it didn't make me happy... half the time the stuff didn't fit or wasn't what I expected... and yes at the supermarket check-out, I used my own bags or carried everything when I forgot.... But it's impossible to reduce waste at the supermarket, everything is over packaged. And although, I planted some herbs... well... they had a pesky habit of dying... Given my altruistic vows to you, to myself I'd failed...

I became despondent.... I did even less... I came face to face with why am I here... how do I make the world a better place, be a better person... am I as empty as the lawyer...?

Well fortunately, life is a journey ... And it is exactly at this time, at Rosh Hashanah, that we have a chance for introspection, to review the year that has passed and consider our path on the year to come...

My premise for today is that it is what we do for others... that gives us purpose and happiness. That if we focus on each other and acts of loving kindness, we will want for less... we will worry less... and our community and our planet will be the better for it.

So what does kindness have to do with Rosh Hashanah, renewal and happiness? Easy right – should be able to wrap this up in 5 ☺

On Rosh Hashanah, God creates us as a blank slate, to establish a new reality, to make a judgment on our free will, on the choices we make today, deciding what is truly valuable for the coming year.

The Rosh Hashanah prayers are about recognising the needs of others, to see ourselves as responsible for others. Rosh Hashanah pushes us to make a difference to society, to play an active role in our Jewish story and build our Jewish future.

How? We make a difference though teshuva, tefillah and tzedakah (prayer, forgiveness and justice). Rabbi Sadoff covered forgiveness yesterday and we are all here praying today so that leaves tzedakah. Let me explain.

Tzedakah is giving help and money to those in need. It's not charity – it's justice and fairness. Charity is giving when you feel inspired or 'in the mood'. But justice and fairness is questioning how we can live well, when others are not. That, God created a world in which there are enough resources for everyone, the tzedakah, the distribution, that's in our hands.

However tzedakah is only part of the story. For true justice and fairness, the tzedakah needs to be mixed with chessed, kindness or specifically gemilut hasidim, acts of loving kindness.

Tzedakah and chessed are similar. Rashi said that the actual giving of money or goods is tzedakah, and the *tirkhah* (the care, the bother) is the chessed. While tzedakah is giving with our material resources, chessed is giving of ourselves, with our time and with our hearts. Chessed, or kindness is at the very core of a Jewish society

Chessed appears in the Torah to communicate God's kindness and love toward humanity as well as towards each other. The Talmud states chessed is core pillar of human behaviour and the Pirkei Avot states "the world rests upon three things, Torah, work and acts of loving kindness".

Acts of chessed are social, they need to engage. It's not simply writing a check, or bringing a can of soup. It is not even about showing up twice a year to the Food Van. Although important, these acts don't engage people in relationships. They fail to touch lives, to care with your heart and mind about others. Sure, people get fed and you might feel you've done your bit, but it doesn't help people through the crises in their lives or make those at the margins feel part of the community....Please don't stop... we need you to keep coming. It's just twice a year isn't enough for me...

Abraham epitomized kindness. His whole life was dedicated to helping others: hosting guests, introducing man to God, and going out of his way for his fellow man. In the sweltering heat, whilst recovering from his circumcision, Abraham stood outside to look for people to invite into his home, to rest and to feast like kings. Abraham showed kindness to others with his whole heart, to complete strangers who had very different values to him such as worshipping idols.

We all need acts of loving kindness. At times, we have all been depressed, lonely, close to despair. We may need company or comfort, encouragement or support.

So I'm building my story...☺. That Rosh Hashanah is about renewal and refocusing our efforts on making the world a better place. That we can do this through tzedakah and chessed, justice and acts of loving kindness.

But ... how does this make us happy?

I work fulltime... in Footscray... I worry about my children's future, if I'm feeding them right, the environment, I am slightly addicted to Netflix and certainly obsessed with my news feed... I'm missing the world... the bits that matter, I don't know my neighbours, I see some of my family once a week... my friends occasionally...I don't know what's really going on in their lives... are they happy... struggling. Oy... how like the heartless lawyer am I...? Focused on my work and what's at the end of my nose...

I've never popped across the road to say hello to the lady who must be 100 plus. In fact, I've never met her. How many people are we not talking to... living alone, lonely and isolated?

Many of us judge success by the number and quality of our possessions, we see these possessions as vital to happiness. Yet materialism is both socially and self-destructive associated with anxiety, depression and broken relationships. I know from my misadventures with online shopping – the time taken to trawl.... and the ooh, I want I want ... and then it either doesn't fit or wasn't what I expected.

And money doesn't increase happiness either. After the depression and world war, studies showed as household income rose there was an increase in people's happiness. But then the line tapered off. Money increases happiness only when it takes people from a place of real threats such as poverty and war, to a place that is reliably safe. After that, money doesn't matter much.

So what's happiness?

Happiness is satisfaction and meaning in your life – feeling positive emotions and purpose. Happiness is our ability to connect with others through meaningful relationships and community.

But how does happiness come from giving, from tzedakah and chessed?

Studies have shown happiness is having satisfaction and meaning in your life – feeling positive emotions, recovering from negative emotions quickly, and holding a sense of purpose. It's our ability to connect with others, to have meaningful relationships, to have a community.

Scientific research provides compelling data that giving is a powerful pathway to personal growth and lasting happiness. MRIs show giving activates the same parts of the brain that are stimulated by food, pleasure and reward. Altruism is hardwired in the brain. The act of giving is pleasurable.

Being kind to others increases our own levels of happiness as well as others. What's more it has a knock-on effect - kindness is contagious, it makes our communities nicer places to be.

When we first arrived in Singapore to live, an expat at the bus stop invited me to her house for a party. It made me feel welcomed and not alone. I made friends at the party and I continued the cycle, inviting newly arrived expats or visitors to my home or to dinner.

We benefit from giving support more than those receiving it - we're also more likely to get support in return when we need it. This may not be like-for-like support, or even from the same person, but being kind to others builds a wide support network which increases well-being all round.

Doing kind things for strangers helps build co-operation, trust and a sense of safety in our communities. It also helps us to see others more positively and empathise with them. Who was it – Rashi or Maimonides that said, even the poor have to give tzedakah, because of the pleasure they receive and how much this act bolsters their self-esteem? These are the foundations of a thriving local community and a flourishing society. Sounds just like our Jewish ethos right?

Let me give you an example...

In 1966, an 11 year old African-American boy moved into a white neighbourhood. Sitting with his brothers and sisters on the front step, no-one greeted them. Passers-by looked, but didn't smile. The boy was very anxious, he knew it had been wrong to come – he'd heard stories of how whites treated blacks.

Then a woman on the other side of the road turned to the children and with a broad smile said, "Welcome!" Disappearing into her house, she emerged minutes later with a tray laden with drinks and sandwiches which she brought over to them, making them feel at home.

That moment changed the boy's life. It gave him a sense of belonging where there was none before. It made him realise, at a time when race relations were fraught, that a black family could feel at home in a white area and that there could be colour-blind relationships. It broke down a wall of separation and turned strangers into friends.

The boy was Stephen Carter, who became a Yale law professor and wrote a book called Civility. The woman was Sara Kestenbaum an orthodox Jew. In his book, Stephen wrote, "In the Jewish tradition, such civility is called chessed – the doing of acts of kindness..." "To this day, I can close my eyes and feel on my tongue the smooth, slick sweetness of the cream cheese and jelly sandwiches that I gobbled on that summer afternoon when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever."

The Mishnah says a single life is like a universe. Change a life, and you begin to change the universe. That's how we make a difference: one act at a time, one day at a time, one life at a time... We may never know what effect a single act may have.

The Talmud says the reward for gemilut chasadim is in this world. When we respond to the other at a time of need, we fulfil our humanity and can find existential meaning in life. We become God's partners in bringing the world that is, a little closer to the world that ought to be.

What can we do?

Small or large acts every day or once a year. Smile at people, the homeless, the aged, the person next to you, say hi, pop round and see your neighbour – take them a book, a plate of cookies or introduce yourself. Call a relative... you've been thinking about them... how are they doing... stop and take the time to listen.... Thank the lady at the supermarket checkout... help someone get off a tram.

Be aware giving doesn't always feel great. It can make you depleted and taken advantage of. And what I find enjoyable... you may not. Find your passion and give of your time, and match your interests and skills with the needs of others.

When you treat someone like a human being they can overcome poverty, frailty, or loneliness and they go on to do acts of loving kindness to others.

Let's bridge isolation, build a community... perhaps a few of us could host Shabbat for members of our kehilah, strangers, people in need, book us through the Rabbi...

Judaism is a journey. We overestimate what we can do in a year and underestimate what we achieve in ten. I now train to work and I'm loving it... it's healthier, I'm outdoors. I take my boxes back to the fruit shop, I've stopped online shopping and I'm working on less packaging. I'm being kind to people, bothering and I'm going to host more Shabbat dinners. I've told you so I can be held to account.

It is what we do for others... that gives us purpose and happiness. That spending more time on each other, tzedakah and acts of loving kindness, we will want for less... we will worry less... and our community and our planet will be the better for it.

"If I am not for me, who is for me; and if I am (only) for myself, what am I. And if not now, when?" ... Hillel

At this Rosh Hashanah, whose life will you touch, what acts of loving kindness will you give and how will your life be enriched?

Shana Tova Umetukah