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Congregation Shaarei Shamayim
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Was I a Fool? Taking Risks, Opening Our Hearts

I'd like to begin this evening with a story by the storyteller Joel ben Izzy entitled "The Hitchhiker." (From *Mitzvah Stories: Seeds for Inspiration and Learning*, edited by Goldie Milgram and Ellen Frankel with Peninnah Schram, Cherie Karo Schwartz and Arthur Strimling.)

One day I pulled into a supermarket down the street from the temple and made my way to the fish department.

"What have you got that's not fresh?"

The butcher, who looked as tired as I felt, didn't seem to understand.

"Maybe something that didn't sell yesterday. Or the day before that. It's for a project," I explained, not wanting to go into detail. "I'm an artist."

That seemed to register. He nodded, then went into the back room and emerged a moment later holding a very dead-looking trout by the tail.

"It's been stinking up the back for awhile," he said. "You can have it."

He wrapped it in butcher paper, and put it in my storytelling bag and went off to teach my class. When it came time for my story, I began by reciting the words, "If you give someone a fish, they eat for a day." I then pulled out the package and unwrapped it. "But if you teach someone *how* to fish..."

That's as far as I got.

"Oooh, gross!" someone shouted. "It's a dead fish!"

"...and it stinks!"

"Where'd you get that thing?"

"Yuck!"

Later that afternoon, as I drove back toward the Bay Bridge, it struck me that whatever half-baked idea I had in mind had not worked. What's more, my students were right – the fish did stink, more so each minute as the car heated up. Driving through Berkeley, I spotted a trashcan near the underpass leading to the freeway. I pulled over, got out, and threw the fish away.

Walking back to the car, I saw a man standing on the corner, his thumb outstretched. He looked a few years older than me, and a good deal scruffier.

“Where to?” I asked.

“San Francisco,” he said.

“Hop in.”

He introduced himself as Tom, and as soon as we got on the freeway, he reached into a shoulder bag and pulled out a Polaroid camera.

“Here,” he said. “This is for you.”

“Why?”

“Well, you’re giving me a ride to San Francisco, which I appreciate, but I don’t expect something for nothing. So I’m giving you my camera.”

“Thanks,” I said, giving it some thought. “But I don’t need a camera. My business is stories. If you tell me yours, we’ll call it even.”

He gave it some thought, then agreed. He told me how he had recently come out from Chicago, where he had been a construction worker. A few years earlier he had fallen in love with and married a woman by the name of Ellen. They had made a down payment on a house and had plans for a family. But then she got sick, very sick, with what turned out to be a brain tumor. They had no health insurance, and spent everything they had saved on her medical care. When that was gone, they sold their house to pay the medical bills. Finally, he stopped working to take care of her. Three months later she died.

Estranged from his own parents, he turned to her family in Oakland. With no money and no place to live, he had hitched out from Chicago, hoping her family might help him start anew.

“But when I showed up at their house,” he said, “they just shook their heads and shut the door. I think they blame me for Ellen’s death, though I don’t know why.”

That had been six months ago. Since then he had been looking for work, but with no home and no phone, and only the clothes on his back, it hadn’t been easy. He had been sleeping in the overpass where I had found him. It was there, hidden in a corner, that he kept his possessions he had brought with him from Chicago, including the camera.

“So where are you going now?” I asked.

“Saint Anthony’s,” he said. “They have a free meal on Sundays at five.”

“But now it’s just one,” I said. “What will you do until it opens?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I usually have to wait three or four hours to get a ride, but you picked me up right away. I guess I’ll wait.”

In the silence that followed, I thought about that morning's failed lesson, and the fish, now stinking up the trashcan in Berkeley. To be honest, Tom didn't smell a whole lot better than the fish. I thought about my home in San Francisco, which I shared with a group of friends. We had a refrigerator full of food, left over from a *Shabbat* dinner, and a shower.

"Have you eaten today?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"So come to my house," I said, "for a meal, and a shower, if you want."

"That would be great," he said.

He ate, and then showered. While he was in the bathroom, I looked through my closet. I had far more clothes than I needed, and figured he might be able to use some of them, and brought out a couple pairs of jeans and some button-down shirts, along with an old duffel bag. I gave him a new razor and he shaved, and then tried on the clothes. He looked like a new man.

"Hey look!" he said, standing before the mirror. "A perfect fit!"

Seeing him there, I was flooded with thoughts --- about how he just happened to be my size, about what my housemates would say if they were home, about teaching someone how to fish and, finally, about my brother. He had a small business refinishing floors, and had just landed a big job for a restaurant in Berkeley. It wasn't construction work exactly, but was close. I asked Tom if he would be interested in working for a time at refinishing floors.

"Are you kidding? That would be great!"

I called my brother, Lee, and told him about Tom. Yes, it turned out, he needed help for the next few days. I put Tom on the phone, and they worked out an hourly rate and plans for a time and place to meet the next morning.

I drove him back to St. Anthony's, giving him bus fare for work the next day – and another twenty dollars besides. As I did so, his eyes welled up.

"I've got to tell you," he said. "This is the first kind thing anyone has done for me since I came here."

That was the story I told my seventh-graders at Hebrew School the following Sunday, starting with the fish – which they well remembered – and ending with St. Anthony's. After the story there was a long silence – which was unusual for seventh graders – and in that silence I could hear the question on all of their minds: Did he show up?

But I didn't let them ask their question. Instead, I posed a question of my own, one that had been on my mind for several days: Was I a fool?

As we gather on this Erev Rosh Hashanah, we bring our own set of questions – who are we, what is our responsibility to others, how do we act ethically and generously? We ask ourselves whether we have lived up to our best selves, whether we have been compassionate, whether we have sought forgiveness and whether we have forgiven others.

And when we review our year and think about the hundreds or thousands of interactions we have with our loved ones, with our colleagues, neighbors, members of our communities, and even strangers, we wonder: Did I do the right thing?

Sometimes we're lazy and sometimes we're thoughtless. But sometimes we are paying attention and we are acting in the best, most ethical way we know how. And still, we don't really know: Did I do the right thing? Or was I a fool?

Was I a fool to bring my daughter's jacket to school when she forgot it, even though I had reminded her three times?

Was I a fool to start up a long email chain with a stranger around a minor political point?

Was I a fool to help a colleague who was struggling with a project?

Was I a fool to attend several long evening meetings to establish a new community group?

Was I a fool to encourage an elderly woman to move into a care facility even though she didn't want to leave her home?

Was I a fool to engage in dialogue with someone who holds racist views?

Was I a fool when I gave a homeless person twenty dollars?

Was I a fool to tell a friend that I was upset when he didn't stand by me at a difficult moment?

Was I a fool to forgive a loved one when she hurt me?

The truth is that we don't know. Sometimes we really do try, and we do the right thing, but sometimes things still don't turn out well. Sometimes we make the wrong decision because our judgment is clouded. And sometimes we make the wrong decision even when we use good judgment.

So why bother? If what we do, in good faith, might lead to a bad outcome, or at least a poor use of our time, why bother? Why be the fool?

As we gather on Erev Rosh Hashanah, reviewing the year that has passed and looking towards the year to come, we bother – and we risk being the fool – because our actions matter. They matter a lot.

They matter because we just don't know where our actions will lead. Faith is not about getting a good outcome. Faith is about knowing, in a profound way, that what we do matters. It matters to us, to our loved ones, to the people we encounter on a daily basis, to complete strangers.

Of course, when things don't turn out well, it's discouraging, and sometimes we despair. We make an effort, we reach out, we work hard to live out our ideals – and then we fail, or it feels like we have failed.

For many years I had a quote by the Catholic social activist and journalist, Dorothy Day, on my bulletin board. She wrote:

People say, what is the sense of our small effort? They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time. A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that. No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless. There is too much work to do.

There is too much work to do – to many acts of kindness to perform, too much social justice to create, too many wrongs to make right.

We must do this work, take risks, and open our hearts, even if we risk being the fool.

That is what Joel ben Izzy seems to tell us when he concludes his story:

“When I called my brother I learned that Tom had never shown up. Though I was disappointed, I did not feel cheated. I had been given a chance to do a mitzvah and, in the bargain, had been given a story as well. As it says in *Pirkei Avot 2:12*, ‘Though we may not be able to finish the task, neither are we free to refrain from beginning it.’”

L'shanah tovah, may it be a sweet year.