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### Cultivating Acts of Chesed

I'd like to begin with a well-known story by the Yiddish writer, I.L. Peretz.<sup>1</sup>

The Days of Awe were approaching, and every Friday morning during the Penitential prayers the Rebbe of Nemirov disappeared. Gone! He was not to be found in the synagogue, or in the house of study, or at some minyan. He was not at home. His door was open, and people went in and out as they pleased, but no one was in the house.

"Where could the *Rebbe* have gone?"

"The Rebbe? Oh! He is in heaven!"

The Rebbe has much business to deal with before the Days of Awe. He must go to heaven to beg and negotiate on behalf of the Jews. They need a livelihood, peace, health, good matches. They want to be pious, but their sins are great. "Who is going to help them, if not their Rebbe?"

One day a Jew came to the village from Lithuania – a Litvak. You know those Litvaks. He was a skeptic. A rationalist. They stuff themselves with the Talmud and the law codes. No emotion!

"Where is your Rebbe?" he asks.

"Our Rebbe is in Heaven."

He laughed. "Heaven?! Nonsense." Determined to find a real answer, the Litvak sneaks into the Rebbe's home, into his room, and scoots under his bed. He waits. The Rebbe comes in and lies down on the bed and falls asleep.

All night the Litvak stays still under the bed, not even twitching.

At dawn he hears the call to prayers. The Rebbe has been awake, groaning for a full hour, feeling all the grief of his fellow Jews, his soul bound up with theirs.

The Rebbe rises. He goes to his wardrobe and takes out a bundle of clothing – the clothing of a peasant. There were trousers, boots, a cloak, and wide hat. A leather belt studded with nails. The Rebbe dresses. The end of a rope dangles out of his cloak.

On his way out, the Rebbe stops into the kitchen and stooping down pulls out a hatchet from under a bed. He leaves the house.

The Litvak trembles as he follows the Rebbe. The dread of the Days of Awe hangs over the dark, quiet streets. The Rebbe walks in the shadow of the houses as he moves down the streets. The Litvak follows him, hearing his own heart beating with every step the Rebbe takes. Finally, they arrive at the edge of the town.

The Rebbe enters the woods. He stops in front of a small tree, and he takes his hatchet out. The Rebbe strikes the tree. The tree snaps and falls to the ground. The Rebbe splits it into small logs, makes a bundle, binds it with a cord, throws it over his shoulder, and heads back to town.

The Rebbe stops at a decrepit shack. He taps on the window.

"Who is there?" cries a woman in a weak voice.

"It is I," said the Rebbe, in the voice of a peasant. "Vassil."

"What do you want?"

"I have wood to sell. It's very cheap." The Rebbe enters the shack. The Litvak sneaks behind him. In the light of dawn, he sees a tiny room with broken furniture.

The woman lies in bed, suffering from illness, huddled in rags.

"Wood to sell? Where am I, a poor widow, going to get money to buy your wood?!"

"I'll give it to you on credit."

"How will I ever repay you?"

The Rebbe is stern. "You are a poor, sick Jew, and I am willing to trust you with a little bundle of wood. I believe that you will repay me. You have such a great and mighty God. And you do not trust him?"

"Who will light the stove?"

"I will light the stove for you."

As the Rebbe laid wood in the stove he softly recited the first portion of the Penitential prayers. As he kindled the fire, he continued with the second portion of the prayers, now more joyfully. When the fire was set, he finished up the third portion of the prayers, and then he shut the stove.

That Litvak, after seeing what he saw, became a disciple of the Rebbe.

And whenever anyone tells how the Rebbe raises himself up very early at the time of the Penitential prayers and ascends to heaven, the Litvak does not laugh. He just adds quietly, "If not higher."

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This story has a special place in my heart. Attending Jewish overnight camp, I remember sitting around the campfire as the director told this story year after year. In many ways the messages from this story formed the basis of my Jewish identity as a child: Having compassion for others is the foundation of what it means to be Jewish. Prayer has its place, but ethical behavior is always more important than ritual traditions. Doing anonymous acts of kindness is preferable to letting anyone know about your *mitzvah*.

All these years later, though, I wonder if it's that clear, if maybe a little more nuance is needed.

The Rebbe leaves his community to do a caring act for someone in need, and he lets his gift to the woman appear to be a loan so that he can preserve her dignity. Reaching out to support others is a central facet of Judaism. "*Olam chesed yibaneh*," reads Psalm 89. "The world is built on loving kindness" (Psalms 89:3). We translate *chesed* as loving kindness, but *chesed* is not about emotion. Chesed is about action. We think we have to feel a certain way to practice ethical behavior, but that's not the message of *chesed*. The Rebbe might not have felt compassionate at all – he might very well have been reluctant or ambivalent – but it's the reaching out to another person that matters. Actions matter.

Even though *chesed* has no emotional component, there is a contradiction. Jewish tradition argues that we are not only to do *chesed*, but to love *chesed*, to place it within our hearts. What's important is that we act, but our feelings do matter. How do we love *chesed*, or put differently, how do we align our hearts with our actions? The thirteenth century Sefer HaChinuch advises, "*Acharei ha'peulot nimshachim ha'levavot* – The heart follows after the actions." Or, as Alan Morinis writes, "To cultivate a love of *chesed*, do *chesed*."<sup>2</sup>

The message: just start practicing acts of *chesed*. Your heart, eventually, will get there.

If it's *chesed* that matters, then why bother with ritual? Why spend your time praying when you can do action? For the great Rebbe to skip the Penitential prayers with his community to help an elderly and ill widow does seem to elevate ethical action over prayer. The thing is, the Rebbe does recite his prayers. Just softly, on his own terms.

Jewish tradition requires a rigid commitment to prayer – three times a day. It's more than most of us can manage, or desire. What's more, we might question whether prayer or empty rituals necessarily lead to an ethical life.

Many of us love the Yom Kippur Haftarah, when Isaiah reminds us that God does not want empty rituals, when God chastises the people for fasting while they are thinking about business, cheating their laborers, and striking with a wicked fist. Isaiah teaches that there must be a moral foundation to our ritual behavior. We read:

“...This is the fast I want:  
unlock the chains of wickedness,  
untie the knots of servitude.  
Let the oppressed go free,  
their bonds broken.  
Share your bread with the hungry,  
and welcome the homeless into your home.  
When you see the naked, clothe them.  
All people are your kin:  
do not ignore them.”<sup>3</sup>

Isaiah speaks to the hypocrisy of the people who do the empty rituals and ignore the very concept of justice. But for most of us, that is not our challenge. For most of us it’s finding a way into the tradition, on our own terms.

I don’t think prayer and ritual necessarily lead to an ethical life. But I do think cultivating prayerful experiences can give us the clarity and commitment to do acts of *chesed*. Having a regular practice – be it meditation, yoga, traditional prayer, or anything else – helps us pull ourselves out of the mundane and refocus on our values.

Prayer and ritual can connect us to community. We need community. I believe we are more likely to do acts of *chesed* when we do them in the context of community. When we are tired and don’t feel like reaching out to others, we have communal support and gentle reminders to help us get there.

If there’s anything that I really question about this story it’s the emphasis on anonymity. It’s true that in Maimonides’ ladder of *tzedakah*, where he lays out a hierarchy of giving, the third highest rung, out of eight, is to give when the recipient does not know who the donor is. Our Rebbe knew the woman he was helping, but she did not know his true identity.

It’s also true that there is an element of humility when we give to others without anyone else knowing. In our age of social media, when no act counts unless a photo captures the action and we broadcast it for all our friends to see, anonymity can remind us to be generous simply because we are needed, and not because there is an element of self-promotion in the mix.

The problem, though, is that the Rebbe gives up an ideal opportunity to bring his community along with him. His action alone helps one woman. His actions along with the actions of his followers could have multiplied his *mitzvah* exponentially. He forgets the precept of *mitzvah goreret mitzvah* – one *mitzvah* leads to another *mitzvah*. His one *mitzvah* might have led him to

do another *mitzvah*. But if one hundred others did a *mitzvah*, and that led them to do another *mitzvah*, think of their power.

Our Rebbe was a poor community organizer. It might have felt righteous to mysteriously disappear, and to have your followers believe you are arguing on their behalf in heaven, but how much more effective would it have been if they had known that he was serving others, and that he had set that expectation for them as well. This is how change begins. And maybe, if enough people saw the miserable living conditions that the poor were forced to endure, they would start speaking up, organizing, demanding more.

As we begin this Rosh Hashanah together, let's think carefully about how we are going to do acts of *chesed*, how we are going to reach out to others when our presence, and our actions, are needed.

Let's not get caught up in our feelings of reluctance or ambivalence, but dive in, with the confidence that our hearts will follow.

Let's keep open the possibility of engaging with our tradition, with prayer and ritual, and use it to connect with community, so we get the support to keep engaging and reaching out.

Let's remember the importance of humility, not broadcasting our acts so we can be seen by others, but also not being so anonymous that we practice these acts alone.

Let's join together, speak up, organize, and demand more.

Wishing you a *shanah tovah*, a sweet and healthy new year, one of growth, and change, and new beginnings.

Notes:

1. Based on "*Oyb nit nokh hekher*" -- "If Not Higher"
2. "[\*Chesed/Lovingkindness\*](#)" from Mussar in Action, by Alan Morinis
3. Translation by Rabbi Rachel Barenblat