

It's the Little Things That Count

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I like to remind people, especially at this time of year, that Judaism is relevant and can help us in our daily lives, and that we can apply its insights into the challenges we encounter in mundane matters. Recently I took my own advice, in an interaction with a cell phone company, no less. I will share with you an incident the kind the Talmud would call, *maaseh shehayah*: a true story that actually happened.

About a month ago I had the misfortune of having a cell phone stolen while I was out of town. I will spare you the details and not go into how it was stolen, or the hassle and inconvenience I experienced trying to track it down. Nor shall I describe the liberating feeling of not having a cell phone for awhile. When I finally accepted that the *gonif* was not going to return the phone, that it was gone for good, and that I needed to replace it is where the story begins. Having just purchased the stolen phone a few weeks earlier, the phone company was uncompromising and not willing to consider my pleas for a waiver of the new phone charge. Their policy was ironclad and they were unwavering. After several unsuccessful attempts to get them to change their policy, I resigned myself to accepting that there was nothing I could do, and that I would have to pay full price for a new phone, adding several hundred dollars to the bill.

I set out on a Friday afternoon to purchase the phone. After being in the store for some time I learned that they did not have the phone I wanted in stock, and that I would have to go to a different store. Again, I will spare you the details, other than to say that when I got to the second store I was told that they had to call the provider to order it. After a lengthy conversation and thinking I had just about completed the transaction the operator put me on hold. The next voice I heard a few minutes later were the words, "Hello this is ----, how may I help you?" I said, "You can help me by getting me back to the person I was just speaking with." The voice on the other end said, "I am sorry, there is no way I can do that." Having wasted several hours, I went home irritated and agitated to get ready for Shabbat. Just before I left home for services I decided to give it one more try. After being on the phone, this time, for about 25 minutes – with the person acknowledging that a phone had been ordered earlier in the day, twice in fact, and that both orders had been cancelled, we were just about done. Once again I was put on hold to approve some minor request I had made. You will never believe what happened next. That's right – you guessed it. After a few minutes I heard a different voice on the other end of the line, asking the same dreaded question, "Hello. How can I help you?"

I am sure that all of us have, at one time or another had a similarly frustrating experience. There is a reason I share all of this *narishkeit* with you today.

A number of thoughts came to mind as all of this transpired. My first instinct was to think, wait a minute. I am a rabbi. There has to be something Judaism can offer that is applicable to help me deal with the aggravation I was feeling at the time.

I came across a verse from the Book of Proverbs which says, "Better to be slow to anger than mighty; to have self control than to conquer a city." Elsewhere, Pirke Avot teaches, "One who is slow to anger, and easy to appease is a saintly person." Next I turned to the Talmud which says, "Do not grow angry,

and you will not sin.” Elsewhere the Talmud comments that when Moses, as well as other sages displayed their temper, “their wisdom departed from them.” I thought – Who knew they had cell phone stores and poor customer service in the time of Moses?

Then I turned to Musar, the 19th century writings by rabbis about the middot, the character traits we should seek to incorporate, or eliminate from our lives. I found a passage that says that one of God’s attributes, which we are encouraged to emulate, and is repeated throughout the High Holiday liturgy is that God is “*Erech Apayim*,” slow to anger. After considering all these texts I was feeling better already. My aggravation subsided further and began to truly dissipate as Shabbat arrived. I thought of all the times I had told my children and taught others that when Shabbat begins we should strive for Sabbath peace. The meaning of Shabbat shalom is that we let go and any tension and not carry any negative feelings with us into the Sabbath. No longer was it theoretical, or me giving advice to someone else. Now I was challenged to see if I could take my own advice.

I read and reflected on the words of the mystical work, the Zohar which describes a beautiful, idyllic vision, “...A vision of shabbat, an insight into the profound meaning of being at One. With the arrival of Shabbat, the Shekhinah is liberated from all forces of evil and harsh judgments... All kingdoms of anger, all dominions of judgment flee from her presence... She is bathed in light from on high while receiving a crown of Shabbat prayers from earth below, from the holy people, all of whom are adorned with the fresh additional souls which are theirs on Shabbat. Then they begin Shabbat prayers, released from thoughts of severity and judgment, as shabbat blessings and peace begin to flow.”

How can you read that and not be overcome with a sense of calm and serenity? As a result, I was able to let go of the tense feelings that I had and resolved to take care of things after Shabbat. Instead of being caught up in my frustrations of the moment, I allowed the mood of Shabbat to settle in and to enjoy the spirit of Shabbat peace. I realized that while it was all annoying, aggravating and time-consuming, the delay was not the worst thing in the world that could have happened.

When you stop what you are doing because it is Shabbat or take a day off of work because it is a Jewish holiday, you submit to and supplant your will to a higher Being. The moment you do this you recognize an important lesson -- that you are not in control of everything. Once we do this we are able to place our priorities in proper perspective and understand what is truly important and what is not.

By virtue of being in a Jewish rhythm and looking at things from the prism of Judaism as my primary point of reference I was able to see that in the grand scheme of things, it was a relatively minor nuisance. As Richard Carlson, author of the best selling little book, “Don’t Sweat the Small Stuff” reminds us in his subtitle, “it’s all small stuff.”

Carlson writes, “Learning to stop sweating the small stuff involves deciding what things to engage in and what things to ignore. From a certain perspective, life can be described as a series of mistakes, one right after another with a little space in between. And one of the mistakes many of us make is that we feel sorry for ourselves, or for others, thinking that life should be fair, or that someday it will be. It’s not and it won’t. When we make this mistake we tend to spend a lot of time wallowing and/or complaining about what’s wrong with life. “It’s not fair,” we complain, not realizing that, perhaps it was never intended to be.”

Sounds like pretty solid advice. How we feel about our predicament is determined as much by our frame of mind as by reality. A consistent message of the High Holiday season is that we can control our

fate and destiny, that we not let the small things take over and control us, to let go over anger, to let bygones be bygones, and to overlook the hurts done to us.

I am reminded of a story about a man who told his rabbi he did not think he had anything to repent for that Yom Kippur. Since he hadn't committed any serious offense that year, he was thinking of taking the year off from fasting and repenting. The rabbi told the man to go and bring a boulder to him, the largest he could carry. After bringing the boulder to the rabbi's doorstep, the rabbi told him to go and gather 50 small stones, or pebbles from different places. The next thing the rabbi asked him to do was to return the large rock to where it came from. Although heavy, it was not difficult to complete the task. The rabbi then told the man to do one last thing -- to return all of the small stones to where he had gathered them. As you can imagine, the man said that was impossible to remember where all the little rocks came from.

The rabbi explained, so it is with life. The real challenge, the rabbi explained, is to realize that the little things, which are often difficult to retract and recall are what we need to think about at this time of year. The little things we do, which may hurt or offend others are the ones that are often more difficult to track down and correct. This is the work of teshuvah and what the Days of Awe, the Yamim HaNoraim remind us to think about – the little things we have done that we need to fix and work on.

In certain respects, if you think carefully about the story though, it actually is the antithesis of Carlson's philosophy. It is saying the exact opposite -- that small things do matter.

Like many of you, I sometimes wonder if the small things we do for others matter. Do they have any impact or lasting value? Are they noticed, much less remembered? Any doubts I may have had were removed when I was going through my chemotherapy treatments the year before last. I discovered how much each and every small act meant to me. Each gesture of kindness, every expression of care or concern meant a great deal to me and brought me tremendous comfort. What was unanticipated was how many people wanted to do something because they specifically remembered things I had done to help them during a difficult time. I was touched when people mentioned something I had said or done for them, often many years ago. If there is any one thing I took away from what I learned when I went through my illness and recovery it is that the small things in life do matter.

Yes, the little things we do for each other count, and that is one of the central messages of our prayers and the Torah readings of Rosh Hashana. We affirm that God takes note and records our deeds. One of the names of the holiday is Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembrance, for this very reason.

A Yiddish story is told about a wealthy man who lived in Eastern Europe. When he died, his life's deeds were placed on the scale by the Heavenly court to judge his behavior and determine the fate of his soul, as is done with any soul. The deeds and misdeeds were placed on the respective sides of the scale, and the scales were tilting on the side of denying his soul the bliss of life eternal. The defending angel assigned to the case consulted his client and asked him if he could think of some deed of kindness he may have done that might have been overlooked, anything even if small, or unintentional, he explained to help bolster his case. The soul thought for awhile and then recalled that many years ago when riding in his carriage his driver heard screams from the roadside. The man allowed his driver to stop and rescue a horse and buggy carrying a family from sinking in quicksand.

The prosecuting angel objected and said that the deed should not be accredited to his account, since he had nothing to do with saving the family. All he did was allow his driver to stop and help. But the judge

ruled in his favor, and allowed the deed to be added to the scale. Even with this though, there still were not enough mitzvot in his account and the scales did not tilt in his favor. The defending angel said that more consideration needed to be given, pointing out that it was not just the entire family, but a horse and a buggy that had been saved as well. With that, slowly, the weight shifted to the positive side, changing the outcome of the court decision and the fate of the soul.

The story teaches that a single act of kindness can have more value than we sometimes imagine. Our deeds add up. The little things we do ultimately become the pattern of how we treat others, and who we are. As Carlson puts it, "You are what you practice most."

So by now you may be totally confused. Which is it: are small things important or not? It may not surprise you to learn that the Jewish answer to this question is: Yes.

Sometimes a small act or small step can be big. It may lead to other developments, and can leave a large imprint. Perhaps that is what Neil Armstrong who passed away last month had in mind when he became the first human to set foot on the moon. Emerging from the spaceship Apollo 11 in Tranquility Base he proclaimed in 1969, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

The reality is that life might be a bit more complex, and figuring it all out difficult to discern. It may not be as succinct and easy to package as, "Don't sweat the small things." To clarify and sum up, keep the following in mind:

1. Be tireless in your efforts to do small things for others.
2. Be careful of the little things you do which may harm others.

But on the other hand –

1. Let go of and consider insignificant and small the slights or bad things done by others to you.
2. When you do wrong another, don't think that it is inconsequential. Seek amends by doing teshuva and asking forgiveness.

And finally, remember to be appreciative of the little things in life.

One of my favorite scenes from Thornton Wilder's classic play, "Our Town" when Emily who has passed away looks back at her 11th birthday party exemplifies how important it is to stop and appreciate all the things we so often overlook. The scene is when she is standing on a ladder, looking back and says:

"Oh, Mama, just look at me one minute as though you really saw me. Mama, fourteen years have gone by. I'm dead. You're a grandmother, Mama. I married George Gibbs, Mama. Wally's dead, too. Mama, his appendix burst on the camping trip to North Conway. We felt just terrible about it --- don't you remember? But, just for a moment now, we're all together. Mama, just for a moment, we're happy. Let's look at one another....

I can't. I can't go on. It goes by so fast. We don't have time to look at one another. I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back –up the hill – to my grave. But first: wait! Just one more look. Good-bye. Good-bye world. Good-bye Grover's Corners... Mama and Papa. Good-bye to clocks ticking... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths... and sleeping, and waking up. Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.

Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? – every, every minute?”

Her advice resonates on the holidays. Carlson advises, “if we would just slow down, happiness would catch up to us.” We should use these days to reflect on our blessings, and appreciate both the big and small things in life, as well as reflect on the big and small things we need to change and seek forgiveness for as well. In the end, life is about much more than the frustrations of dealing with poor customer service representatives.

May you be blessed with a good year.

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