

## ***The Saddest of Illusions***



**B**efore *Rosh Hashanah*, my dear friend and colleague **Rabbi Fredi Cooper** and I were talking about sermon topics for the High Holy Days, which led us to musing about “the state of the world.” Rabbi Cooper said to me, “We live in an anxious world. Just pick any one week and follow the headlines in the paper and it will be clear that our world has issues every day that produce a state of anxiety for each of us.”

Actually, it is more than anxiety. It is fear: fear for our nation and our people; for ourselves and our children; for the world as a whole. From wars that rage in seemingly countless regions, to the ever-present threat of terrorism, to the out-of-control rate of homicide in our own city, the world appears to be a place of grave danger. Not only that, but the world appears to be in danger; endangered, that is. Whether it is the spectre of global warming and its potential for environmental chaos, or the looming shadow of nuclear terrorism and its threat to millions across the globe, we wonder if the world as we know it is ending!

It is no wonder that we feel anxious. We are responding to the danger all around us.

*Philadelphia Inquirer* columnist Claude Lewis wrote that this danger is not an aberration. “When it comes to murder, we live in a terrible time. Nearly every evening’s news program reveals a new killing, if not in the wars in the Middle East, then the wars in our streets. Gangs. Drug factions. Stranger on stranger. A female hospital worker is shot to death while on her way to work in the early morning darkness. A youngster dies in the crossfire between warring factions in a neighborhood too close to our own. Hardly easy times.” And then he concludes with bitter resignation: “A day without carnage in America is accidental. It is a rarity, or perhaps more to the point, the saddest of illusions.”

It is easy to despair when one considers the events that we are bombarded with every day. And yet, how can we live without hope? How can we live without the hubris to imagine that somehow we can change the world.

But in fact we can. Helen Keller once wrote “I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty and joy to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. . . for the world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also, by the aggregate of tiny pushes of each honest worker.”

As individuals, we cannot stop wars, reverse global warming, or curb the mayhem in our streets. But even the most global events are set in motion every step of the way by one person, working alone or with others, towards a goal, for good or ill. And if in the end it is individuals who make the world more fearful, the “tiny pushes” of each honest and caring person have the power to make the world a better place.

We must never despair of life, or the world we live in. Despair drains our energy and depletes our enthusiasm for living. It blinds us to opportunity. Rather, we must put our shoulder to the wheel and push by doing deeds that improve the quality of life for our loved ones, our employees or employers, our community. Deeds of goodness reverberate through society. Deeds of love and kindness make a difference. We may not be able to change the world in one fell swoop, but we can make our little sphere of influence more hospitable to human habitation. And that is no “illusion.”

As we begin a new year, let us focus less on the painful things we cannot change, and put our energy instead into deeds that make a difference. In the aggregate of those deeds, who knows but that global change may be achieved by the “tiny pushes of each honest worker.”

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