

Welcome to Brooklyn

Rabbi Sruly Koval / Parshat Toldot / November 25, 2022

One of the important lessons that election season reminds us of is the power of the individual. So many people don't bother going to vote because they are convinced that their vote will not make a difference. But all it takes is a close election to remind us just how much everyone's vote, voice and action really counts.

Last week I attended an extremely moving funeral that was a powerful reminder to me of just how impactful one human being can be. Mrs. Golda Diller was born in Poland in 1933. At 5 years old, she, a few siblings, and her parents survived the impending Nazi invasion by escaping to Siberia. Her siblings who remained behind in Poland perished in the Holocaust. Conditions in Siberia were so intense that her father died of starvation.

After the war ended, she ended up in a DP camp, where she remained until 1952, before finally coming to the United States. She met and married Joseph Diller in the DP camp and together they built a beautiful family here in Cleveland. She and her husband lovingly raised seven children and lived to see close to 100 descendants in her lifetime. Over ten of those family members eulogized her lovingly, and described a woman, barely five feet tall, who created an incredible legacy of family and faith. I was so inspired by what I heard and saw at the funeral, and left feeling energized by what this one woman was able to accomplish through a lifetime of love, faith and perseverance.

Here's another example: last Friday I woke up super early to take my daughter to the airport for a 6:45 AM flight. On the way back home I realized I was low on gas, and stopped off at a Sheetz gas station in Brooklyn, Ohio. It was barely 5:30 AM, but this particular gas station was hoppin'. Truckers, early commuters and others were buying food, coffee and random merchandise inside the store. After I filled up my gas tank, I went inside to purchase a cup of coffee (decaf, of course : D). When it was my turn to pay, the cashier saw my cup of coffee and said out loud, "On the house!" I was caught off guard by his generosity, and asked him why. He said, "I'm feeling generous... Besides, I need to start the day right." (I have to admit that a thought that crossed my mind was, I should have gotten a large coffee instead of a small -- my grandfather would have been proud.)

I couldn't stop thinking about the fact that the very next day's Torah portion was about Abraham role modeling both chessed, acts of lovingkindness (by welcoming and feeding the three strangers who came to visit him), as well as the concept of starting your day right. The Torah specifies that "Abraham arose early in the morning..." (Genesis 22:3), which represents the importance of getting an early start to do the right thing. These were the very same character traits that this cashier displayed by surprising me with a free cup of coffee.

I wondered if this was the energy of the Torah portion coming to life. I am sure that the cashier totally forgot about this incident shortly after it happened, but this small action by this anonymous stranger really impacted the rest of my day. In fact, several times during the day I found myself inspired to enhance certain acts of chessed that had come my way, all because of the inspiration of this stranger!

Our tradition teaches us that G-d created the world as an act of kindness and our mission in life is for us to emulate G-d by taking advantage of the opportunities to fill our lives with acts of chessed. Sometimes we need reminders and sparks of inspiration. Sometimes the inspiration comes from within and sometimes it can come from unexpected people and places. I mean, who knew that Brooklyn was such a Jewish place?!