

The Power of Small Deeds: Gifts of Strength and Hope

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I want to begin with a story which depicts one of the darkest moments in all Jewish History. This story, recounted in the Talmud (TB *Gittin* 56b), is confirmed and retold by the Jewish/Roman historian Josephus in his book called The Jewish Wars (VII 8:3). The story describes the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 CE and provides testimony of this horrific and life-altering event for the Jewish People.

But this is not simply an account of an historical event. There is a lesson to be learned. You see, when we are confronted by calamities, large or small, we need a plan, a way to respond. We want to know that others have faced similar challenges and prevailed. When we face calamity, we search for the confidence and reassurance that we can yet stand again. We need a strategy, to restore our strength, and the hope to persevere.

Here is the story:

It was the ninth day in the Hebrew month of Av when the Roman general, Titus, made his way slowly and deliberately up to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, into the vast Courtyard, on his way to the Holy of Holies. He was on a mission.

Vespasian, the Roman Emperor, had sent Titus from Rome to defeat those pesky and rebellious Jews, to sack the city and scatter the Jews to the corners of the earth .

With those orders, Titus wanted not only to defeat the Jewish resistance, as Vespasian had requested. But, wanting to impress Vespasian, Titus would do even more: He would not only kill and scatter the Jews but would destroy the Temple. This, more than anything else, would break the spirit of the Jews. Titus would defeat God himself, as well as God's people. He would prevail not only physically and militarily but spiritually and theologically, by destroying their Temple.

The Holy of Holies, the Holiest place in all the world, was a place no one would dare to enter, other than the High Priest, once each year, on Yom Kippur, when he was given the permission to enter. On that day alone would the High Priest enter the Holy of Holies and intercede on behalf of the Jewish People. And so, Titus would begin there.

Titus sought no permission to enter. He entered the Holy of Holies in arrogance and defiance. There he mounted the alter. He drew his sword and slashed the curtain, which, according to the Talmud, bled. And he railed against God:
It appears that your strength exists in water, saving the Jewish People and drowning the Egyptians. But where is your strength now? "O Great God of Israel, let us see how you shall fare against the armies of Rome! If you are so great, strike me down, if you can! If you are so mighty, come down and fight!" And Titus railed on.

What did God do? A voice came from heaven and said:

"Sinner! Son of a sinner. I have a tiny creature in my world called a gnat. Make war with the gnat, Titus!" And God sent a gnat to fly into Titus's nose.

Titus left Jerusalem with the gold and silver accoutrements which he stole from the Temple. A likeness of Titus's triumphant return to Rome is engraved on Rome's Arch of Triumph as a record for all time. But the story does not end there.

Shortly following his return, Titus was plagued with excruciatingly painful headaches, described with far more color and glee in the Talmud than in the records of Josephus. The story comes to an end when Titus orders his servants to break open his head, in order to end the unbearable pain. And, when his head split open, that gnat had grown, eating away Titus's brain. The Talmud reports that a gnat, the size of a bird, flew out of Titus's skull.

The message here is clear and unambiguous: The most celebrated general of the most powerful army in the world, challenged God Himself, and was soundly and painfully defeated by the smallest of God's creatures: A mosquito. A gnat. Sometimes that which is most powerful and most significant is quite small. Power, you see, is not always about size.

We have been taught that bigger is better and more powerful. And that may be true for bombs and professional wrestlers, but we have learned, of late, by way of the coronavirus, that there is tremendous power in small things, as well.

When the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, in August of 1945, exactly 75 years ago, nearly 150,000 people were killed. At Nagasaki, 75,000 were killed, a total of 225,000 killed by the largest and most deadly bombs in the world. In this country, the coronavirus has already killed 200,000 and counting. Nearly 20

million people around the world have tested positive for COVID 19. Globally, over a million have died.

This little virus, so small that it cannot be seen by the naked eye, has changed this world, not just for those who have died or become sick. This virus has changed nearly every person in the world. We are more cautious. We maintain more distance. We are more attentive to actions which help protect us from this incredibly contagious and lethal virus. We wear masks to prevent others from becoming sick from a virus which we may, unwittingly, be carrying and which we may inadvertently transmit.

Today I want to think small, to consider the power of small actions and gestures. The problems we face seem too large to solve on our own. There are too many people in need. Too many dying of COVID 19. Too many starving, homeless, destitute. Instead, if we think smaller, if we think of the gnat that killed Titus or the coronavirus which has killed so many, we begin to realize that there is power in small things, power not just to cause disease and death. There is great power to do good in simple deeds we can perform. And, I believe that these seemingly small deeds also have the power to change the world.

A wonderful expression of this notion is found in *Pirke Avot*, in the name of Rabbi Judah the Prince (2:1):

*...Hevei zahir bimitzvah kallah ki'vaChamura, she-
ay'n ata yodei'a matan si'charan shel haMitzvot.*

Be as attentive to a light/easy mitzvah as to a weighty /difficult mitzvah because no one knows the reward for each mitzvah.

When we consider observance of Jewish Law and practice, it is easy to become overwhelmed. We have laws, prohibitions, and proscriptions which make many demands upon us: Keeping Shabbat, observing Holidays, following the laws of Kashrut.

When I speak with congregants and, particularly with those converting to Judaism, about Jewish observance, I am aware of the tendency to overwhelm them with the complexities and, even, intrusiveness of the requirements of Jewish life. And so, I suggest, “Start small”.

Start small because your growth can be gradual. Start small because you can set reasonable goals which are manageable and less intimidating. And start small because in the world of mitzvot, who knows which mitzvah is big and which is small? Maybe there are smaller, lighter, easier mitzvot, which we might consider *mitzvot kallot*, as they are called in *Pirke Avot*. But what we think is small, in fact, may be of greater value and worth than those which seem bigger, heavier and more difficult. And who knows, anyway, which are which: which mitzvot are the bigger and which are the *mitzvot kallot*, the easier/lighter/smaller mitzvot?

Brad Aronson is a local writer who wrote a book entitled, Human Kind. He starts by sharing his own story, about his wife, Mia, who was diagnosed with stage-four breast cancer. She needed to begin treatments immediately, **that day of her diagnosis**, in fact. Caring for his newly-diagnosed wife, Aronson was thrown into a maelstrom of emotions, chores, and tasks. He wanted to be with his wife as she went through, what would become, a two-and-a-half year process, including a

bone marrow transplant. Yet there was also their 5-year-old child to care for. How could he stand by his wife, when his 5-year-old needed him? How could he care for his son when Mia needed him by her side?

Aronson describes how, over the course of the months and years of her treatment, his friends and family mobilized. One person said, “I’m coming over every Wednesday to baby sit”. Another coordinated cooking. Someone else did the carpooling. And on and on. These actions were, in themselves neither monumental, nor did they require special skill nor did they demand expertise. They required only will.

What would our world be like if everyone chose a small act of kindness or caring as their “*mitzvah*”? What would it do for those we would help? What would it do for us?

This has been a strange and unimaginable year. The arrival of a pandemic has required that we change our entire way of living, of connecting, of gathering. We have been prevented from doing that which we previously thought was mundane. We have been required to create new routines and practices. We yearn for the day when we might be able to go to the grocery store without facemasks, without aisles that are designated as “one way”, without 6 feet between one another in the check-out line. I recently went to my bank and was greeted at the door by a sign that read: Please do not enter without a mask! That which we have taken for granted for our entire lives has become the ideal for which we yearn.

Our new “normal” has also taken its toll on us. We leave our homes only when absolutely necessary. We do our errands and return as quickly as possible. In the process, we have become alienated from one another. Our isolation has created a sense of loneliness and detachment. And this is where our synagogue community has stepped up and intervened in important and meaningful ways. I hope you have felt this too:

*For those unable or reluctant to go out to do errands, a cadre of shoppers has volunteered to do neighborhood shopping. When Lori and I returned from Morocco we were required to self-quarantine for 14 days. A member of the congregation took our list and delivered our groceries to our door a few hours later. What was amazing was not that she got everything on our list. What was amazing is that it was done without fanfare or recognition. And yet, to me and Lori, that gesture was monumental.

*Although our offices and building were closed, and some tasks came to a halt, our staff continued to work from home. Among their new assignments was to divide up the entire membership list and call each and every household to check-in, to make sure that someone who needed some help got that help, to spend a few minutes chatting, a welcome break in the monotony of being homebound.

*In an effort to remain in touch, Cantor Rosner, along with the help of a few volunteers, coordinated a new initiative to reach every person who observed a *yahrzeit* on that day. And to each, he, or our volunteer, offered to recite the “Memorial Prayer / *El Mal’eh Rachamim*”. And in every case, with every call, the gesture was acknowledged with gratitude as well as a

sense of deep satisfaction: “How nice to hear from you!” “How thoughtful of you to think of me”. “I did not know how I would observe this yahrzeit without going to services.” One person remarked: “This was the kindest and most meaningful gesture anyone has ever done on my behalf.”

*Similar responses were received whenever we reached out to connect: With an ongoing list of activities and classes hosted on Zoom, we maintained contact, remotely yet meaningfully, with hundreds of our congregants.

For years we have orchestrated our “Soup for the Soul”, delivering a quart of soup to an individual or family who might appreciate a warm and delicious gift. We have now enhanced that gift with challah deliveries, made by a team of challah bakers, including Elisheva Apple, who also helps to deliver them.

I have asked our Director of Community Engagement, Hallie Chandler, to work with me and us to help us continue these, and other simple acts, *mitzvot kallot*, small mitzvot which are felt so powerfully. Here’s how we’ll do it:

You’ll receive an email after Rosh HaShana which will explain this notion of *mitzvot kallot* and suggest a number of small gestures you and I can make.

Here is a list of people. Can you call a few?

Here are a few members that need someone to shop for them. Can you do that once?

Someone needs to be driven to an appointment, helped with an errand, spoken with on the phone or visited. Can you do that once?

Over these past few months, despite the changes we have noted in our lives, we have experienced some of these powerful acts, either as a recipient of as a helper. A single deed will not change the world. A single deed will not solve any of the big problems faced by humanity today. But a single act of kindness, for that person, might mean the world.

We are large congregation. 700 families. What makes me most proud of the nearly 30 years I have spent here as your rabbi, however, is not how large we have become. It is how we have been able, **despite** our size, to remain small, to focus on the kindness we can extend to one another, to the *mitzvot kallot* we are able to perform.

Today's Torah reading tells the heartfelt story of Hagar and Ishmael. Banished from Abraham's tent, she is given a small amount of food and water. Mother and son are sent into the desert. Within a short time, Hagar and her son had finished the few morsels of food and water. And Ishmael cried. Hagar took her son and placed him beneath a tree while she ran away, far enough so that she would not hear the pleading and anguished cries of her son.

But God heard the cries and said to Hagar:

Return to your son. Extend your hand *ve-hachaziki et yadech bo* / reach out your hand and your hand will strengthen him. (Gen. 21:18)

Do you understand what happened? God said, reach out your hand to your son, not because you have food and water. You will have it. But when you reach out to another person, it is not food or water that they need. It is hope. And when Hagar reached out, Ishmael, eventually was given water and food. But even

before he received the water, his mother, Hagar, gave him something even more important: Hope.

There is a story told of a poor man and his son, walking home together. They had worked all day but earned enough for only a few scraps of food which they would share for their dinner. As they walked, they were approached by a beggar:

“Please, can you share with me your food. I haven’t eaten all day and have nowhere else to turn”

The father, without hesitation said, “Of course” and handed the beggar the food which he and his son had intended for themselves. The father and son then continued to walk to their home. It was not until they reached their home that the boy, with tears in his eyes, turned to his father and said:

“How could you give away all of our food. ? That was all we had to eat. We shall now not eat until tomorrow when we can earn some more money for our food!”

The father smiled and explained:

My son: A person can live for three weeks without food. A person can survive for three days without water. But a person cannot make it even until the next day without hope. I didn’t give that man food. I gave him hope.

My friends, we are still in the midst of a pandemic. We are fortunate to have food and water. But more than anything material, we can give to each other something more precious than a physical gift. We can give an antidote to loneliness. We can offer companionship. And we can provide hope for each other. For without hope we won’t make it even to tomorrow.

May we learn during this coming year the power of small gestures. May we learn to reach out with small, *mitzvot kallot*. And may we instill within each other that which is indispensable to our survival, the gift of hope.