

Hayyei Sarah – 5774 Kindness

Shabbat Shalom.

It was our last day in Israel for this trip – just two weeks ago. It was a typical last day in Israel – pretty full. We woke up early so we could get to the Robinson’s Arch part of the Kotel for Uri Dvir’s bar mitzvah. It was a wonderful *simhah* that included not only a beautiful service, but also a walking tour of the Old City and a festive lunch at the Mount Zion Hotel.

Afterwards we had a number of errands to do: some last-minute gifts and so forth. As often happens, the day started to slip away. I started to get a little anxious thinking about all the things we needed to do: have dinner, get gas for the rental car, pack up the apartment that we were staying in, return the rental car, return the cell phones, get the VAT tax back at the airport, and catch our flight.

You know what happens.

Things got busier and busier as the day got more hectic. Less and less time to accomplish more and more.

After grabbing a bite to eat, Sharon and Matan made a pit stop near the supermarket in the French Hill neighborhood of Jerusalem where we were staying. In the meantime, Talya, Ari, and I ran into the local supermarket to pick up some Israeli candy and spices and a few staples that are unavailable here.

We ran through the store as fast as we could, checked out, and were running back to the car.

Suddenly, Talya stopped me and said, “Abba, I’ve got a really bad headache. I think I need some Advil.”

“[Rolling my eyes] How bad?”

“Really bad.”

“Talya, do you really need Advil?”

“Yeah.”

“[Deep breath.] We were just in the supermarket.... [Bigger Deep Breath] OK, let’s go back and get you some Advil.”

We ran back to the supermarket to look for some medicine.

Knowing that it would be hard to find things in a “foreign” store, I ran right up to the help desk where a woman and a man were on duty. I asked them if they carried any medicine – if they carried any Advil. They said that they did not.

In fact, the man told us: “*Ein lanu shum kadurim* – we don’t have any medicine here.”

Apparently, Israel allows medicines to be sold only in pharmacies. From my American point-of-view, this seemed kind of ridiculous but *mah la’asot* – what could we do?

Backing away from the counter dejectedly, I chalked it up to classic Israeli bureaucracy that makes it difficult to get what you need easily and quickly at the moment you need it.

But just then the woman behind the counter said, “*Mah ha’ba’ayah* - What’s the matter?”

“*Yeish labat sheli ke’eiv rosh* - my daughter has a headache.”

“*Al tid’ag* – don’t worry, *ani evdok im yeish li* - I’ll go check if I have some.”

She opened her locker, took out her pocketbook, and sure enough, found some Advil. While she opened the bottle and handed Talya the medicine, the man opened a bottle of spring water and poured Talya a glass.

With a reassuring motherly smile, the woman said, “*Targishi tov* - feel better.”

It was a classic Israel moment - at first, bureaucracy seemingly stifling us and then a simple act of kindness.

Can you imagine a supermarket here where you walked up to the information booth looking for some medicine, finding out that they didn’t carry it, and then having someone offer it to you on their own?

First of all, it wouldn’t happen because people would be worried about getting sued. But second, it simply wouldn’t happen here. America is a great country, but this, this is one of Israel’s strengths. It’s like a big extended family; everyone feels a connection that leads to this type of kindness.

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In our Torah reading this week, *Parashat Hayyei Sarah*, we see Eliezer, Abraham's servant, searching for a wife for Isaac. He goes to the well, the classic meeting place in the ancient world where people would find each other, and he looks for someone. It's interesting to note what he looks for.

Is it the most beautiful woman?

The most brilliant woman he could find?

The one who is connected to the most powerful families?

The one who is the wealthiest?

No, none of these.

He looks for someone who performs an act of kindness. That is his test; that's his standard.

Sure enough Rivkah, Rebecca, comes right up and brings water for him and his entire entourage of ten camels. Now, even in New England, we know that camels drink a lot; and after a journey, they drink an especially large amount.

Our *Humash* says that each camel would drink 25 gallons of water! That's over 200 pounds of schlepping! So when Rebecca brings enough water for all ten camels. That's literally a ton! It's an incredible act of *hesed*, an act of kindness.

By the way, I love that our commentary points out that it takes the camel only 10 minutes to drink the 25 gallons – that's impressive!

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Our rabbis point out that Rebecca was pretty young when she met Eliezer at the well and Goldie Goldbloom, a writer and teacher, indicates that this teaches us that Rebecca's natural disposition was to be kind. That was her starting place. Not everyone begins life with that disposition.

Some of us seem to come with kindness imprinted in our DNA; for others, it can be more challenging; it can take many years or maybe even be a life's work.

Our tradition understands that and, therefore, gives us an elaborate set of *mitzvot*, as well as narratives, that embed *hesed*, acts of loving kindness, into our tradition.

We can look at so many aspects of our tradition: from how we eat to how we speak to how we pray. All of this is inculcating within us the values of caring for the other, of awareness of the other.

From that place of awareness develop the ability and the desire to perform acts of *hesed*, acts of lovingkindness.

As we say in the morning service, “Let no evil impulse control us [...], strengthen our desire to do good deeds.”

It’s not that we don’t have a good inclination, *yetzeir hatov* – the inclination to help others, it’s that it needs to be magnified and cultivated.

We need to practice it.

That’s why it is actually the routines in the ritual that are helpful. Every time I *daven* throughout the week, I put money in the *pushke*, in the *tzedakah* box. It’s not always that spiritual, but it’s a basic act that I do each and every time I say the *Amidah* during the week.

And it is in that rote repetition that it becomes totally internalized and a part of me. We could go through dozens and dozens of *mitzvot* that inculcate within us the practice of performing acts of kindness.

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Recently I learned that Gordon Lederman, *z”l*, a friend with whom I studied in Israel twenty years ago died at the young age of 41. He was a passionate Jew, a wonderful *mensch*, just a super human being, filled with kindness. He was also a patriotic American who served on the 9/11 Commission. I remember how his always wanting to perform acts of *hesed*, acts of loving kindness, whether it was opening up his apartment to invite people for a meal – *hakhnasat orhim* or whether it was going to visit someone who was sick – *bikkur holim*.

From one of our mutual friends, I heard that even when he was sick he would ask his visitors how they were faring. When one couple said that they were experiencing fertility issues, he replied that he would hold them in his prayers for healing. He always wanted to take care of someone else. He simply had kindness built into him.

Now I didn't know him as a child, but I suspect that the rigorous observance of *mitzvot* that he practiced throughout his life helped to inculcate within him this deep passion for performing acts of kindness. May his memory be blessed and inspire all of us to perform acts of kindness.

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Rabbi Fel pointed me to an article that taught a similar lesson. (<http://cognoscenti.wbur.org/2013/10/24/red-sox-paul-reville>):

Paul Reville wrote about his experience at Fenway last Saturday night as the Sox clinched the AL championship sending them to the World Series.

"A friend and I were watching the on-field celebration from the box seats immediately adjacent to the Tigers' dugout. Naturally, most of the Tigers and their staff had disappeared immediately after the game. However, a few remained behind, and were glumly and silently observing the Red Sox's jubilation.

"A beefy, 30-something man was standing next to us. [...] This man glared into the Tigers dugout and with no provocation whatsoever, reeled off a string of nasty, gloating, 'rub their noses in it,' abusive comments to the Tigers group which had been quietly minding its own business. Understandably, one of them responded with an obscenity directed at the attacker, an insult he'd fully earned from my perspective, and I said so to my friend. The guy didn't take the insult well, he got his back up, began to get pugnacious and my friend, in a barely audible voice, urged the overheated young man to cool it. He paused, the Tigers group left. The incident was over. Nothing else was said.

"A few minutes later, one of the Tigers' senior officials came into the dugout by himself. My friend, spotting the Tigers official, leaned into the dugout and said, 'You have a great team. You had a good season. Congratulations. You'll be back next year.'

'Thank you so much,' replied the Tiger.

"At this, the formerly antagonistic guy, who had overheard this exchange, turned to my friend and said, 'That was nice. I shouldn't have said what I said. I

let myself get carried away. [...] I shouldn't let that happen to me.' My friend shook his hand and said, 'We're all working to be better. Good for you.'"

What a great example of learning to be kind.

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Toward the end of his life, Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "When I was young I admired clever people. Now that I'm old, I admire kind people."

This is such a profound statement and it reflects Heschel's struggle between two great Hasidic masters, the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, that popularizing, spiritualizing movement within Judaism 300 years ago, and the Kotzker Rebbe, who was an uncompromising advocate of sharp analysis for the sake of finding truth some 200 years ago. The Kotzker sometimes would deliver harsh words in his pursuit of truth, while the Ba'al Shem Tov always brought a sense of comfort and calm.

Sometimes we seem to carry both these approaches within us. Part of us wants to get things done, to pursue the truth and to reach a goal; another part, tells us that the way we get there is equally, if not more important, and the journey there should be filled with a sense of kindness.

That's not always easy. Life is filled with situations that might make that a struggle. But the *Mishnah* says it succinctly and famously: "The world stands on three things: on Torah study, on spirituality and prayer, and on acts of loving kindness.

While for some of us, being filled with kindness may come quite naturally, as it did for Rebecca; for others, it may be a lifetime of struggle and yearning and pushing ourselves to deepen our sense of empathy, caring, and kindness.

Our Torah and *mitzvot* constantly take us back to a focus on hesed, on loving kindness.

Judaism is a system that has us hone kindness, like the baseball player who spends hours in the batting cage honing his skills. So too, Judaism asks us to spend hours engaged in study, in prayer and spiritual practices that lead us to a life of kindness.

Whether it's the fan who modeled the right behavior, my friend who died too young, the woman and man in the supermarket who handed Talya the Advil and the glass of water, or whether it is Rebecca who provided the water thousands of years ago, may these models inspire all of us to live a life of kindness.

Shabbat Shalom.