

## **“Olam Chesed”: Building a World of Love**

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I remember it well. Liana must have been about eight or nine years old. It was just before her bedtime and we were in her room. We were having, as we did most nights, some quiet time - talking about her day; what was happening at school; her friends. Before long, as often happened with Liana, the subject of music and songs came up. In the conversation, I happened to mention a song that I especially liked. Without missing a beat, Liana looked up at me and said, “Dad, that song is from the 1900’s!” After absorbing my dad-music-critique, I explained to her: “Liana, I’m from the 1900’s!”

Liana and Jonah are much older now. Liana happens to be studying for a Master’s Degree in choral conducting – having fallen in love with music much older than the 1900’s. And, by the way, with a little help from her dad, she has also gained a healthy appreciation for 1980’s rock music.

Still, Emily and I fondly recall our bedtime routines with the kids. At the end of a long day - for us and for them - it felt good to slow down, to read a story, talk, and settle them in for sleep.

In Jewish tradition, there is a special practice that many parents choose to include as part of their children’s bedtime ritual. It is saying the Sh’ma. It’s a custom that is actually first mentioned in the Talmud. Our rabbis teach that it is a simple way at the end of one’s day to express hope for a restful night’s sleep and gratitude for life’s goodness. In our family, at the end of our saying the Sh’ma, we always added an, “I love you,” and a kiss just before turning out the light.

Child development experts tell us of the importance of children having a healthy nighttime ritual. After a full-day in the busy swirl of school and so many activities, it is grounding and reassuring for children to have focused personal time before bed. During these moments, we are told, our children receive from us the clear message that, as chaotic as our lives may be, we are here for them; we appreciate them; and we love them.

Our rabbis tell us that the sharing of parental reassurance and presence is so important that, after God had created Adam, God offered these to him as well.

According to one legend, when God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, Adam reveled in its beauty. Adam’s joy was full. However, late in the day he started to notice that the sky was growing darker. Looking up, he saw the sun setting. Having never before experienced nighttime, Adam grew frightened. He thought to himself: ‘Perhaps the world is returning to its original dark and chaotic state. Maybe, this darkness will even completely envelop me!’”

Anxious and worried, Adam sat alone. Upon seeing this, God reached out like a parent and offered help. According to the midrash, God created for Adam two special stones and taught Adam how to light a fire. God then reassured him that the light of day would, indeed return and that He wouldn't leave him. Feeling better, Adam rested for the night.

Sometimes, it can feel as if we too are living in a world of increasing darkness. Some of the circumstances that we experience, as we know, are global: war, natural disaster, increasing hatred and intolerance. All of these, as we know, weigh heavily upon our hearts. Other issues are more personal: illness, loss, a strained family relationship, financial worry. At any one time, we may be holding one or many of these.

To this reality Judaism offers to us an abiding and an embracing ethic of care. Our teachings awaken us to the humanity of one another and of our responsibilities to each other. Our rituals give expression to our deepest life joys and provide solace when times are difficult. As well, the communities that we create ground us in friendship and relationships of genuine concern. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why, following the October 7th attacks and with the rise in antisemitism during this past year, there has been a dramatic increase in involvement in Jewish communal life.

For generations, Judaism has centered the offering of strength and solace. In a world which can wear us down; make us more hard-hearted; and move us to turn inward, our tradition, instead, calls upon us to open ourselves to the presence of one another. To be present and responsive to each other's pain.

Rabbi Sharon Brous is a leading rabbi, community leader, and author. In her recent best-selling book, the *Amen Effect*, Rabbi Brous writes about a particular section of the Mishna that, she says, deeply inspired her scholarship and her rabbinate. The Mishna, for those who are less familiar, is a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century collection of rabbinic legal literature. The broader section of text that Rabbi Brous examined describes the physical details of the Second Temple when it stood in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. Truth be told, most of these writings seem to be more suited to an architectural brief than to a religious volume.

However, there is one part of this section of text that stands out as different. As Brous notes: 'In one passage we read about an ancient pilgrimage ritual that took place three times during the year. On these occasions, hundreds of thousands of people would gather in Jerusalem and would ascend to the Temple Mount - the focal point of Jewish religious and political life in the ancient world. When the people arrived, most of the people would enter the enormous courtyard complex and then make their way to the right – circling counterclockwise. Eventually, these people would exit close to where they had entered.'

As the passage continues, it then describes something unexpected. Amongst the many people who came, those to whom something difficult had happened in their lives - those who were grieving or lonely or ill - their instructions were different. While these people would walk through the same entrance to the Temple Courtyard as everyone else, they would make their way

to the left. Doing so, eventually, as they walked, these individuals would come face-to-face with the other members of their community.

According to the Mishna passage, whenever someone who had walked to the right would encounter someone who was broken, they would stop for a moment and ask them: “*Mah l’cha makeefl’s’mol?*” – “Why is it that you go around to the left?” “What happened to you?”

In Brous’s retelling of the Mishna passage, “the bereaved would answer, ‘I lost my mother.’ Or perhaps they would say: “My husband left,” or “My diagnosis is bad,” or “Our son is sick,’ or ‘I just feel so lost.’

Upon hearing about the struggle of their neighbor, the person would reply with care: “*HaShochein babyit hazeh y’na’cha’meh’ka.*” - “May the One who dwells in this House....May God....bring you comfort.” “May you be enwrapped in the embrace of this community.”

It’s a remarkable text and a powerful practice that reveals how *chesed* – the sharing of genuine love and concern - has, since ancient times, been at the heart of Jewish life.

Our gestures of compassionate outreach make a difference. Indeed, according to one rabbinic teaching, a person who visits with someone who is ill – or who is present for them during a time of personal pain - relieves them of 1/60<sup>th</sup> of their sorrow.

In fact, oftentimes, as we know, even the simplest gestures can make the biggest difference. A call. A text. A meal. A visit. A willingness to truly listen. All of these, of course, repeated over time as we continue to walk with those who struggle. Following the loss of her father, author and speaker Heather King reflected: “I ponder the mystery of how the smallest human touch brings comfort all out of proportion to the size of the gesture.”

In our own TBS community, we are deeply mindful of and responsive to each other’s challenges – large and small. Our TBS Chesed/Compassionate Outreach - beautifully and blessedly organized by Mindy Pasco-Anderson - is one way that, together, we work to foster a *Kehillat Chesed* - a community culture of care that helps us to hold one another. Through it, we deepen our own personal sense of compassion, while also binding us together as one.

While one’s ability to reach beyond self may not always come naturally, the truth of the matter is that it is a deeply embedded part of nature.

Dr. Suzanne Simard is a professor of Forest Ecology at the University of British Columbia. Throughout her career, Dr. Simard’s studies have focused on tree growth - particularly as it is related to re-forestation areas after the logging industry has felled several trees. Dr. Simard notes that, for the longest time, experts in her field had believed that newly planted trees would best thrive in areas that were completely open. The thought was that, in open spaces, saplings would be free from competition and would have easy access to plenty of light and water.

However, what Dr. Simard and other scientists discovered is that these lone trees actually struggled to grow. When planted on their own, they most frequently succumbed to disease and to climatic stress.

For years, the question of why, counter intuitively, trees flourished most fully in the crowded settings of the forest remained a mystery.

Recently, Dr. Simard made a fascinating, breakthrough discovery. Following decades of studying how trees grow in a variety of environmental settings, she found something fascinating that takes place underground. By tracking the movement of molecules and DNA in the root tips of trees, Dr. Simard discovered that life-strengthening chemical interactions were taking place between the fungal threads of different trees. These relationships between roots are called mycorrhiza. And because of them, Simard found, in forests every tree is connected to each other - incredibly, even between trees of different species! And, fascinatingly, when scientists tracked the flow of life-sustaining nutrients from one tree to another, what they found was that the flow most often moves from the strongest trees to those that struggle.

In recent months, of course, we have witnessed firsthand the profound impact of a life-sustaining support network within our broader Jewish community.

On October 7th, Kibbutz Be'eri was one of the forty-five communities that was attacked. Moti Barak is the Agricultural Director of the kibbutz and he was the first of the kibbutz residents to return home when it was safe to do so. When he arrived, he, like his friends and neighbors, mourned, assessed the damage, and began to consider the future of the kibbutz. Recently, Moti shared the following:

‘As survivors, we will live with this trauma our entire lives. (At times), it’s too much. I feel old. Angry....I don’t have the strength to go on....(But these) volunteers are relentless...They come from all over: professors, doctors, teachers – traveling hours to pick the fruit and vegetables that need to be harvested...(They) won’t let me give up...They come in the heat and in the rain – from Canada and the United States. Someone flies in from Louisiana – staying a whole month. They are religious and secular – forgoing days of work. There is so much to be done. And they keep coming, no matter what.’

Moti continued: ‘(And so....) I pick myself up. What choice do I have? (The terrorists) came to destroy as much as they could. But, little by little, we glimpse green. The potatoes that we planted several weeks ago are sprouting and we are creating new homes on the kibbutz. It won’t be through blood, sweat, and tears. We’ve had enough of that. But with love. We will rebuild...’

On this Yom Kippur morning, as we acknowledge our own human frailty; our own uncertainty in face of suffering; we gather with one another so that we might be reminded of our capacity to be strengthened by one another.

When Moti Barak speaks of rebuilding from love - knowingly or not - he is drawing language from a beautiful text found in the book of Psalms. In Psalm 89, the writer describes God as working, even now even now, to make our world: "*Ki Amarti*" - "This I declare:" - he writes. "*Olam Chesed Yibaneh.*" - "The world is built through love."

Commentators who have studied this text have noted that the creation language of the Psalm is different from the creation language found in the book of Genesis. In Genesis, we read of God as either "creating" the world - in Hebrew "*Bara*" - or "Forming it" - in Hebrew: "*Yatzar.*" Here, however, the Psalmist has chosen to use the Hebrew word: "*Banah*" - "Build"

Author and teacher Tara Mizrachi writes that in the Genesis accounts of creation, when God creates, God does so with a single utterance or divine gesture. However, Mizrachi notes, that when the world is being created by *chesed* - by love - it can only be built in the same way that a house is built: brick-by-brick, gesture by gesture, caring-deed by caring-deed.

And so, on this Yom Kippur morning - on a day that we recognize our need for the grounding strength of at-one-ment with one another, we pray:

May we open our eyes and our heart so that we might better notice those amongst us who are in need.

May we, this day, affirm our commitment to living lives of open-heartedness; of empathy; and of graciousness.

And may we be inspired to most fully embrace our sacred task as builders of an "*Olam Chesed v'Shalom*" - "a world of love"... "world of peace."

Amen.