

YIZKOR
PASSOVER – 8TH DAY
APRIL 14, 2012
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Each year new Haggadot are published and grace the tables of Jewish families around the world. This year, a new one was published which actually received a great deal of publicity not only in the Jewish press, but in media far and wide in the non-Jewish world as well. The New American Haggadah was edited by Jonathan Safran Foer with a new translation by Nathan Englander. The text in Hebrew is quite traditional with only a few additions and subtractions and there is a very interesting chronology line that is kept throughout the book. There are also four commentaries at approximately ten places throughout the book written by individuals with varying backgrounds. I would like to concentrate this morning on merely one of the comments and, in fact, the last one in the book.

As we all know, the last song of the Seder experience is Chad Gadya, telling the story of one little goat that was bought for two zuzim. It is usually sung in a rather glorious fashion as the last song of the Seder. Throughout the ages interpretations of this song suggest that the little kid is none other than the Jewish people and that each of the succeeding animals, objects, individuals and spirits represent different nations that have conquered one another throughout history. The message seems to suggest that persecution will last forever or, at least, until the righteous G-d brings it to an end. At the same time, the Jewish people will be eventually saved.

In his commentary on this song, Jeffrey Goldberg, the national correspondent for *The Atlantic*, suggests that: “One little goat is ultimately responsible for the smiting of the Angel of Death by G-d. That is some goat. Most great movements for change start with small acts by anonymous people.” He reminds us of Shifra and Puah, the Hebrew midwives who spoil Pharaohs plans of killing the firstborn of the Israelites. He also suggests that the Arab spring is a good example in our current day: “And how did this great wave of unrest start? It started because a vegetable vendor in an out-of-way Tunisian village, oppressed by an uncaring and rapacious government, burnt himself alive to protest his treatment.” As we know, on December 17, 2010, Mohammad Buoazizi set himself on fire in protest of the confiscation of his wares and the harassment and humiliation that he reported was inflicted upon him by a municipal official and her aides. According to Goldberg: “His death enraged all of Tunisia, and that rage spread to Libya, Egypt and beyond.” The Arab spring is clearly not at an end and we don’t know where that end might take us, but Goldberg’s point is really very interesting.

Goldberg suggests: “The power of a single human being is awesome, in part because so few individual acts occur in a vacuum. We all look to others for leadership, for positive examples. Which means that we have within us the power to be that example. We all have within us the power to spark revolutions, through the lives we choose to lead. And, it is our choice!” Goldberg’s take on Chad Gadya reminds us of *The Power of One*. Each of us as a singular human being has an enormous amount of power to create

goodness or to instill evil in this world. The choice is ours and with each act, each word, each deed we can have an enormous impact on the world around us. Sometimes the world seems so large and we seem so small. Yet, as we look at human history we recognize that many times it was a single individual who made a difference, who changed the fate of the world and the destiny of human beings. The power that we have is not small or insignificant whatsoever. We ultimately choose the destiny not only of our own lives, but in many cases those who follow us for generations on end.

This Yizkor on the last day of Pesach always comes just a few days before Yom HaShoah, The Day of Remembrance for those who were killed in the Holocaust. On Wednesday evening, here at this Congregation, we will remember the 6 million of our brothers and sisters who were mercilessly killed during the Second World War. It is also important that we recall those, like Shifra and Puah, who stood up to power and who recognized that an individual's actions can make a difference. It is not insignificant to note that before one enters Yad VaShem, the memorial to the Holocaust in Israel, one passes by a number of trees that have been planted in memory of the Righteous Gentiles, those who saved Jews during the Shoah. Here in our own city, the Illinois Holocaust Memorial and Education Center has followed that pattern. On the wall outside of the museum are enumerated individuals and communities whose heroic deeds saved Jewish lives. Many times putting themselves in great danger, they reached out and helped one person, a family or members of a community to survive the terrible Nazi onslaught.

Sir Martin Gilbert has written a book entitled *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* in which he tells the stories of those who made a difference in the world through their life-saving actions as they challenged Nazi barbarism and stood up for what is right and proper in the world.

One of the stories he tells is of a Roman Catholic nanny in Vilna who saved her young Jewish charge. Her name was Bronislawa Kurpi. She saved the life of one person, Abraham Foxman, who is now the national executive director of the Anti-Defamation League and a leader in the Jewish community. Abraham Foxman was four years old when she took him to safety to her own home and brought him up as if he were her own child, naming him Henryk Stanislaw Kurpi. Foxman himself tells the story that when the order came for the Jews to be assembled into the Ghetto in 1941, she asked his parents what was to become of him. Finding out what would probably occur she hastily offered to take him, to keep him safe until their return. For four years, Abraham Foxman's parents did not see him and he grew up in German occupied Vilnius. He was baptized and raised a Catholic. He states: "If my parents had perished, I would have been raised to be a priest." Miraculously, his parents survived the Holocaust and returned to claim him after the war. For Foxman becoming Jewish was a growing process. Even as a young Jewish child he continued to make the sign of the cross in the home of his parents, who were observant Jews. It took a number of years to reorient his life once more. He writes: "My Christianity was a means of survival. I have always had great respect for Christianity." In 1991, Foxman, along with 1,600 others, met in New York City at the first International Gathering of Children Hidden during WWII. In Jerusalem at a subsequent gathering in 1993, he exhorted all those present "to bear witness to the

goodness of those who had saved and cared for them.” One person had reached out and saved a singular life. That kindness eventually led to a family being re-united and Abraham Foxman the opportunity to live a full Jewish life.

One person can make a difference. One person can save a singular life. As the Mishna in Sanhedrin instructs us when warning witnesses in capital cases: “For this reason man was created alone to teach you that he who destroys one human life in Israel is accounted to him by Scripture as though he destroyed a whole universe; and who saves one human life (in Israel), it is accounted to him as though he had preserved a whole universe.” One person has the power to create a whole universe and that very same person has the ability to destroy it. Think for a moment of the individuals who have made a difference in your life. Perhaps it was a singular act of kindness; perhaps it was a kind word and a caring gesture. Perhaps it was a mentor who took you under his or her wing and taught you in your professional life, in your academic life or just to be a good person. Perhaps it was a nurturing teacher who saw the spark in you and fanned the flame to allow you to be successful. Perhaps it was a stranger whose name remains anonymous who granted you a scholarship to attend school, to become an intern, to attend Camp Ramah, and that event changed your life to make you the person that you are today.

My colleague, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove, currently the Rabbi of Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City, in one of his sermons tells the story of two college roommates at Columbia University, Sandy and Art. Sandy was a scholarship student, a dry cleaner’s son and a brilliant promising scholar. In his junior year, Sandy began to have serious eye problems, advanced glaucoma, and within weeks he did, in fact, lose his vision during a final exam. Sandy left school and moved back to Buffalo, his home town. His options were dim, but he mustered up the courage to return to school. His roommates responded by committing to read to him from his textbooks every night, and the combination of Sandy’s natural talents and the patience and compassion of his roommates enabled Sandy to return to his former high-academic standards.

One day, the two roommates, Art and Sandy, took a subway ride downtown to run an errand. The two went together, but once they had completed their errand Art said: “All right then, Sandy, I’ll see you back at the dorms.” And he walked away. Sandy had not been on the subway alone since he had gone blind and he now had to summon up the courage to get home. However, unbeknownst to Sandy, Art had, in fact, never left him. When Sandy finally made it back to campus, Art tapped him on the shoulder and said: “I knew you could do it... I wanted to be sure you knew you could do it.”

Rabbi Cosgrove reports that Sandy, Sanford D. Greenberg, went on to graduate summa cum laude, become an inventor, corporate CEO and an advisor to the President of the United States. However, his roommate Art did not have such an illustrious academic career. He dropped out of Graduate School hoping to become a singer. When he stood at his crossroads, he turned to his friend Sandy in need of money. Sandy took his lifesavings of \$500.00 and sent it to his roommate so Art could make a recording explaining simply: “He made my life; I needed to help make his.” The name of Sandy’s

roommate, Art Garfunkel. It was Sandy's check that supported the making of what would become the great hit "The Sounds of Silence." It takes but one person to make a difference in someone's life.

In a few moments, we will recite our Yizkor memorial prayers. We will remember those individuals who truly made a difference in our lives and whose impact upon us continues to this day. We will recall parents and siblings, spouses and children, teachers and mentors, those who were killed in the Shoah and the martyrs of Israel. Each of them was a singular human being who made a mark in this world and who may have had enormous impact upon the people who we are today.

One day, there will be those who will remember us. What will they say about us? How will we have touched their lives? How will we be remembered? On this, the 8th day of Pesach, at a time of the recitation of the Yizkor memorial prayers, let us not just remember those of us who have gone before us, let us resolve to make a difference in this world through our actions, our kind and gentle deeds, our words, and our caring natures. As Jeffrey Goldberg writes: "If a mere goat can bring about the smiting of the Angel of Death, just imagine what you, a free person, could do, just by responding to the God of Freedom." Let us take this simple lesson to heart and make a difference in the lives of others.