

Living for Others is the Best Thing You Can Do For Yourself

by Rabbi Michael Schwab - Rosh Hashanah 5773 (2012)

A woman walks along the beach engrossed in her own thoughts and to her surprise she comes upon a large tent with several tables inside, crowded with seemingly random objects. She then sees a man suddenly dart from the tent to the ocean and grab an object floating in to shore. She approaches him. “What are you doing?”, she asks. “None of your business” he replies curtly as he moves past her without even slowing down. From a glance at his face she could see in his eyes a passion glowing, tinged with pain – this is more than simply a man scavenging lost items from the sea. She follows him and after some attempt at resistance, with tears in his eyes, he shares that when the Tsunami hit Japan he was there, at a mall. The water suddenly crashed in like a river, rushing through the building carrying things and **people** by him like a scene in a nightmare. He somehow grabbed hold of a railing and hung on for six hours. Eventually, he was

rescued, and before he knew it, he was back in his apartment in the United States as if nothing had happened.

He couldn't function. He felt he needed to do something for the victims of the Tsunami but he felt powerless. Then he learned from a news report that the currents of the ocean were dispersing objects lost in the Tsunami up and down the Western Coast of the United States. He decided to dedicate himself to collecting everything that washed up on shore and to putting it on Ebay, the internet merchandising site, hoping the original owners or their family would one day claim it. And in this small way he could help them regain a bit of their lives lost in the Tsunami.

In Japan, a family that had been devastated by the Tsunami was living with hundreds of others in temporary housing. The father, once an executive in a large Japanese corporation, was now jobless - the company almost bankrupt. Their home, and everything in it, had been destroyed, including a Samurai sword handed down in his family for over 500 years. His twelve year old son, feeling helpless and not even having a school to go to

anymore, decided to attempt the world record for dribbling a soccer ball without letting it touch the ground, hoping that any accomplishment, however trivial, would give his family something for which to be proud. As he approached the record, the heart-felt story was picked up by the media. At that moment the woman from the beach was watching the news, and heard about the family and the missing Samurai sword. Remembering something, she immediately relayed this information to the man collecting items and in a frenzy he began searching his table of objects. He found it! He found their sword! He had somehow succeeded – he had actually recovered something that was lost and could now restore it to its owner. Reunited with such a meaningful family heirloom at such a difficult time gave that Japanese family, and their entire community, a huge boost of hope and this act of kindness not only helped them but it returned to the man on the beach a sense of his worth and purpose in life.

A beautiful and powerful story. A few small acts, the kindness of the woman to notice the man on the beach and turn

aside, the compassion of the man on the beach to draw from his personal experience the motivation to reach out to those in need and the sweetness of a boy trying to help his family rise from a crushing sense of despair. These acts of kindness and love stretched across an ocean; they reverberated in ways none of them could have comprehended and they had an impact far beyond what they could have imagined. Such a story makes us marvel at the connection we humans share, at the effect one simple act performed by another can have on a fellow human being and at the multiple unanticipated ways such acts link to one another in such a powerful fashion.

“We are all interconnected. Our lives are invisibly tied to those whose destinies touch ours. Who touches your life?” Like many of you I have little time for television. However, a new show my wife and I started watching called *Touch* used that line as its opener and for this reason it drew me in. Who, indeed, touches our lives? And whose lives *do* we touch? Starring Keiffer Sutherland, the show is premised on the belief, that every human

being is connected to the other and that the unfolding of our lives is affected by the actions of people, both familiar and unknown, even though we rarely understand in what way, or are even necessarily conscious that it is happening. In fact, the story I told about the Tsunami, while based on real story fragments, came from that show. And like a good tale should, it challenged me, in this case, to be more conscious of how the way I lead my life impacts others, of how powerful my daily actions truly are, and of how many opportunities life actually presents me, each day, to help others and change lives.

“Al Shloshah Devarim Haolam Omed”, *Pirkei Avot*, our source of wisdom, states. “On three things **the world stands**: on Torah, service to God and **acts of loving kindness**”. **Am I** attuned to the pain of another? **Do I** act with loving kindness in response or just move on because I don’t have time to deal? Have I allowed my own experiences with loss or trauma to motivate me to help another? Have I attempted, in the face of despair or tragedy that is beyond my ability to alter, to help people heal and move forward?

Each time we make the decision to connect and care in these ways, like the characters in that story, we unleash a healing power with the beautiful potential to influence the lives of others in a profound way that we will likely never even understand.

Many of us, when we think about it, have experienced ourselves the power of what appeared to be a **small** act of kindness but which actually had a great impact. An opportunity given, an encouraging word at the right time, a little bit of mercy after a mistake, a listening ear when no one else seemed to care, these can all change the course of a life.

One need not dip into the realm of fiction to see this. Let me tell you the real life story of Hilde Back and Chris Mburu. When Hilde was a schoolteacher in Sweden, she decided to sponsor one child's education in Kenya. Hilde's sponsorship of Chris Mburu cost about \$15 per month and was part of a program in which the teacher's association was participating. It was no big deal to her, not a dramatic act of heroic stature. However, without an education in Kenya, life often becomes a struggle to survive.

Thanks to Hilde's generosity, Chris avoided that fate. In fact, he graduated high school, went to the University of Nairobi and then attended Harvard Law School. He became a U.N. Human Rights Advocate and started his own charity, the Hilde Back Education Fund, named after his benefactor, whom he never met. The fund pays tuition for deserving underprivileged students in Kenya and since the charity's start, 350 children have been supported through the funds he has raised. Three hundred and fifty lives have been changed directly . . . so far - that doesn't even include the impact this initiative had **indirectly** on the families of these kids. And who knows how many of **these** students will be inspired, as Chris was, to give back in their own way. One pebble dropped in the water – so many waves.

Yet, the story is not even complete: the pebble that Hilde dropped into the life of Chris was one she herself caught by someone else. The only reason Hilde Back was even alive to support Chris was because of a stranger's kindness to her. You

see, Hilde was a **Jewish** child living in Germany during the rise of the Nazis and the beginning of the Holocaust. Both of her parents were killed in concentration camps, but a stranger helped her escape to Sweden. Hilde said that as a Jew, she wasn't allowed to go to school in Germany, so it seemed natural for her to sponsor schooling for someone who couldn't otherwise attend. **She** was oppressed, **her** prospects for life dismal, and a stranger showed **her** kindness. She felt it was only right to do the same for another. The kindness of one person to a young Jewish girl, the kindness of that now grown Jewish woman from **Sweden** to a young kid from **Kenya**: the result, completely different lives for hundreds of people.

Yet, this way of relating to others, with compassion and loving kindness, is exactly what our tradition has demanded of us from the very beginning of our peoplehood. The command in the Torah is, "Do not oppress the stranger" -- Do not take advantage of the down-trodden, -- why? The Torah says, "**Because** *you* were

slaves in the land of Egypt.” That *because*, usually such a common word, emanates extraordinary meaning here. The command simply could have been “don’t oppress, don’t abuse”. Yet, how often are we instructed how to act using platitudes and how often do those teachings cling to our heart? However, the Torah understands that experience, both personal and collective, is the greatest teacher – and that we have a responsibility to learn from it. Our tradition is telling us here that once we have suffered, as our people did in Egypt and throughout history, we have a holy obligation to reflect on what happened to **us** and then connect to others – by acting with compassion towards those who *still* suffer, wherever they may be. Like the man on the beach, we should not be able to live complacently when we know others suffer as we did; it is our obligation to recognize our connection and act.

And not every act has to have such a grand effect. I personally still remember being fourteen at Camp Ramah in the Poconos when my kind counselor pulled me out of my activity to

tell me that my beloved grandfather had died - my *zaide*. He was so sensitive, giving me privacy as I cried like a young child, at a time when boys are very conscious of crying, spending hours that day making sure I was both not alone but that I had my space. A small act but, with no parents around and going through my first experience with death, he reached out to me and opened my eyes to the difference one can make for another during difficult times. I will **never** know the full effect of his kindness, I was not privileged to see the next ripple in the wave of this story but what I know for sure is that he demonstrated for me, in a way that is clearly seared in my memory, how much a **little** sensitivity and compassion, can make such a **large** difference.

The power of such kindness, spurred by the recognition of the connection we share with others, is clearly powerful in and of itself. However, there is also another layer of awareness here that we can achieve: a theological layer, a spiritual layer, that provides a powerful frame to the notion of our interconnectedness and the

power of kindness. What strikes me is the concept that interconnectedness is simply part of the built-in structure of the universe. The world was “wired” this way from the start. Today, on the day which is also known as *Yom Horat Olam*, the day the world was created, we recognize the **unity** of the universe. We realize that we don’t have to **artificially** draw these lines to each other; we don’t have to **create** the connections ourselves; they are actually already there, and have been since the beginning of time! Our job, therefore, is mostly to be aware of them -- to search out the **suprising** and sometimes hard-to-notice ways we are connected. **Otherwise, we may live as if we are actors in a play who miss our cues and forget our lines – the scene still happens but does not come out the way it could, or should.**

For me this core idea is not akin to fate, for tied to the notion of fate is inevitability. In fact, I believe that the premise of the **Jewish** approach to this issue is exactly the opposite -- outcomes are not inevitable at all. As partners with God, our actions, the ways in which we shape our world and connect to others, make

literally all the difference. The great Maimonides writes explicitly, “free will is granted to every human being. Everyone is capable of becoming righteous like Moses or wicked like Jeroboam – the Creator, God, does **not** decree this”. If a man wants to be good, he has the power to do so. If he wants to be evil he can do that as well. There is no one to stop him. Our tradition places the responsibility to make the world a place of goodness squarely on our shoulders. Built-in to the nature of life, ordained at creation, is the principle that our choices matter, from the grand to the small, and that their effects reverberate across the globe and across time in ways we can often only imagine.

Our belief in free will, combined with our notion of the connection of all of creation, is crucial to our identity as human beings and as Jews. Because this combination means that I have the power to make life better for others on a daily basis no matter what my life circumstances are. It means that when I truly identify with another human being, I can open myself up to their needs, which both helps them and allows me to touch the essence of life.

As my colleague and friend David Schuck once wrote, “**All of us** wake up with the very same yearnings: a desire for love; a longing for meaning . . . and for many of us, a connection to the Transcendent . . . (and) we realize that despite our different *things*, in the end, we are all so similar. It is then that we realize that as we gaze into the eyes of another, we are truly looking in the mirror.” Understanding this deep connectedness that human beings share gives us the greatest motivation to act with compassion, and according to our tradition, as in Pirkei Avot, acting with compassion is one of the most powerful ways to live a meaningful life. As Bodhi Elfman, the actor who plays a *Hasidic* Jew in the show *Touch* (and happens to be Jewish himself), said in an interview, “[The show] totally opened up my eyes to the way everything is connected. The more you feel connected to everything around you, the more **responsible** you feel; your actions don’t just involve yourself but create a widened sphere of influence around yourself. It makes you look at your own actions more deeply.”

The problem is that our society seems to be drifting in a different direction. It is happening slowly in more of an unconscious, rather than malicious, way. Unfortunately, and ironically, considering the globalization of the world, many of us in the United States seem to define ourselves more by who we are as **individuals** than who we are as either Jews, members of a community or more generally even as human beings. The result is that we pay more attention to our differences than our similarities and we unconsciously cultivate **disconnect** rather than connection. We have taken the notion of our uniqueness and specialness, which can be very positive concepts, in a potentially harmful direction.

This past June at a High School commencement, David McCulloch Jr. stood in front of a large auditorium of graduates at Wellesly High School in one of the beautiful suburbs of Boston, and delivered the following commencement message. He said to them, “**You are not special. You are not exceptional.** Contrary to what your soccer trophies suggest, your glowing 7th grade report

card . . . and despite the assurance of that nice Mister Rogers . . .
you are nothing special.”

Amidst what you can imagine were shocked looks, disgruntled murmuring and a few amused smiles after he delivered *those* lines, he continued and began to explain a bit more. “But, Dave,” you cry, “Walt Whitman tells me I’m my own version of perfection!” **(But) You see, if everyone is special, then no one is . . .** (and here is the heart of his message) In our unspoken but not so subtle Darwinian competition with one another – which springs . . . from our fear of our own insignificance, a subset of our dread of mortality -- we have of late, **we Americans, to our detriment, come to love accolades more than genuine achievement.** We have come to see **them** as the point – and we are happy to compromise standards, or ignore reality, if we suspect that that is the quickest way, or the only way, to have something to put on the mantelpiece . . . No longer is it how you play the game, no longer is it even whether you win or lose, or learn or grow, or enjoy yourself doing it ... Now it’s “So what does this get *me*?” As a

consequence, **we cheapen worthy endeavors**, and building a Guatemalan medical clinic, for example, becomes **more about what goes on your application than the well-being of Guatemalans. . .**”

His message is this: in the halls of the homes, institutions, and businesses where we spend most of our time, the question we must ask ourselves is, for what **are** we striving? Towards what end are most of our energies directed? Is our system of living aimed at achieving worthy goals, based on compassion, advancing the condition of the world and connecting us to each other? Or ultimately are we simply trying to make ourselves feel special? Trying to cultivate a sense that we are different and better than others? Instead of returning the objects we find on the sand, so to speak, we hang them up for all to see. Please don't misunderstand. I believe that awards and accolades can be wonderful tools to recognize people for engaging in worthy endeavors. In fact, one of the measures of a society is what types of actions gain a person recognition and benefit. If doing good deeds is what motivates

people and what merits recognition in our society, this is a positive. Much better than giving awards for something far less important. However, somehow we have formulated a system of recognition that too often **stresses:** acquiring a list of accolades, instead of, achieving the goal of making a difference. As a result we are striving for an artificial distinction that serves the needs of the self instead of a meaningful accomplishment that serves the needs of everyone.

To begin to correct this McCullough suggested the following to the graduates. He said, “As you commence, then . . . I urge you to do whatever you do for no reason other than you love it and **believe in its importance** . . . Resist the easy comforts of complacency, the specious glitter of materialism, the narcotic paralysis of self-satisfaction. Be worthy of your advantages. . . (And Remember) . . . **Like accolades ought to be, the fulfilled life is a consequence, a gratifying by-product. It’s what happens when you are thinking about more important things.** Exercise free will and creative independent thought, not for the

satisfactions they will bring you, **but for the good they will do others**, the rest of the 6.8 billion—and those who will follow them. And then you too will discover the great and curious truth of the human experience - **that selflessness is the best thing you can do for yourself**. The sweetest joys of life . . . come only with the recognition that you're not special. . . . Because **everyone** is.”

McCullough delivers a powerful message that I feel speaks to the core purpose of existence. As I mentioned, Rosh Hashanah marks creation . It celebrates the very formation of the fabric of life, which came into being from a unified source – a single creator of all. On such a day, during this time period of reflection and renewal, we seek the meaning of the lives with which we have been blessed, **as well as the lives of the others with whom we share the world**. Today, by focusing our attention on creation, Rosh Hashanah compels us to acknowledge in action the deep interconnectedness of all human beings, the shared sacredness of all souls and the spiritual truth that the greatest distinctiveness we can achieve – the **greatest** reward – comes from caring for others

with true intention, out of a sense of love, compassion and a legitimate feeling of obligation to the other as a fellow human being.

As Rabbi Ed Feinstein writes, “We walk the world with pride in our success, we feel the glory of power. Then comes death, and teaches us that we are humble, fragile, creatures, who inhabit this world for a minute span of time. And at that moment, we gain wisdom . . . Isn’t it interesting that no child ever rises at the funeral to eulogize a parent and says, ‘I’m proud of my Dad for all he earned. Or I’m proud of Mom for what she controlled. No. What do they say? I’m proud of all my father gave, the way he reached out and helped others. I’m proud of the way my mother loved and cared and nurtured. There are twenty-thousand graves at Mt. Sinai Memorial Park. And not one of them says, “Graduate of Harvard” [or], “Corporate Giant.” All the descriptions are relational: “Loving Father, Gentle Mother, Loyal Friend.” No child ever says, I love my parents for all they owned. They say, I love the moments we shared . . . I wish we’d had a little more time . . . one

more hug. It takes the presence of death to awaken us to the life of the soul.”

Hopefully, on one point he is wrong. That it won't take the presence of death to learn such a lesson. We can learn it now. Fortunately, by the great genius of how God created the world, living life for others is in fact the most meaningful, fulfilling way one can choose to live. Psychological studies over the years, including a Time magazine poll in 2004, have shown that people cite the ways that they make a difference in the lives of others as one of the greatest sources of their own happiness and fulfillment. There are studies that link positive feelings, both immediate and intermediate, to volunteering. And just this May, Harvard released a study by business psychologist Michael Norton, that demonstrates that giving one's money to charitable organizations, or spending it on **others**, *increases* happiness, while spending money on oneself has absolutely no effect on happiness. Studies aside, I would also suspect that many of you in this room have personally felt the positivity that comes with helping another

human being. Understanding how connected we are and how important it is to allow that connection to motivate us to act compassionately is a win-win-win: we benefit, the “other” benefits and the world as a whole benefits.

The Hasidic master, Yakov Yosef of Polnoye taught that the human being is a ladder, planted on the earth with its top reaching heaven. **We** have the ability to connect heaven and earth. Let us learn from our tradition, our Torah, our holidays and our rituals. Let us find the strength and wisdom **this** year to act with greater compassion, which we do through our daily acts and obligations. Give just a little more to *tzedakah*, join that synagogue committee, volunteer a few more hours for that not-for profit you admire, look for the pain of others, turn towards them when you see it, make that call to your congressman concerning the issues about which you are passionate, tell your loved ones how much you love them, praise people when you see them do something you respect, try to smile a little bit more, be kind even when you are angry or irritated, be merciful even when you have the right to enact justice,

reach out even when you are tired or when the other seems far away and pledge to yourself that you will always measure your actions by whether you are doing the right thing.

“We **are** all interconnected. Our lives **are** invisibly tied to those whose destinies touch ours. Who touches your life?” The answer only seems open for discussion, but isn’t. Who touches **your** life? The answer is -- “**everyone**”. Shanah Tovah!