

EREV ROSH HASHANA
MAKING A DIFFERENCE
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RABBI VERNON KURTZ

Forbes Magazine ranked Sam Walton, the founder of Wal Mart as the richest man in the United States from 1982 to 1988. It is reported that as he was lying on his death bed in 1992 he struggled to get out his last few words on earth. He had given his life for his business and it had exceeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Yet, it was at a price. He hardly spent any time with his wife, his children and his grandchildren. Unfortunately, he didn't allow himself moments of loving interaction and rejoicing with his loved ones. His final three words? "I blew it." He had made billions of dollars, but by his own admission had failed in life.

Most of us think of Sam Walton as a great success story. He had begun his Wal Mart discount city store in Bentonville, Arkansas on July 2, 1962. By 1990, U.S. sales alone were \$32 billion. In March 1992 President George H.W. Bush presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Only three weeks later, he was on his death bed. Why was it that Sam Walton believed: "He blew it?"

Rosh Hashana is a time for us to re-evaluate our lives, to look at our values and to see whether we are living up to our potential. It is a moment in the year when we are asked to seriously contemplate our place in the universe, our role in the human race, our connection to the Divine and, if necessary, make changes in our lives before it is too late. Sam Walton may have been successful in business, but he was not necessarily so as the leader of his family.

What is it that we commemorate on Rosh Hashana? Most of us would say that this is the anniversary of the creation of the world. However, a Midrash in Pesikta de Rav Kahana suggests that the world itself was created on the 25th day Elul. On the 6th day, the 1st of Tishrei, that is Rosh Hashana, God created human life. Thus, we don't necessarily commemorate the creation of the entire world today; instead we commemorate the creation of human life. This is our birthday, this is the anniversary of our creation and as we become one year older, hopefully, we can become a little wiser as well.

The biblical story and this Midrashic concept lead us to the singular vision of human life and our responsibility to make the most of it. Thus, in the Mishna, in the 4th Chapter of the tractate of Sanhedrin, we are told how they used to warn the witnesses when they testified in capital cases as their testimony could have an enormous impact on the life of another human being. The Mishna tells us that they had an immense responsibility: "For this reason was man created alone, to teach us that whosoever destroys a single soul, Scripture imputes guilt to him as though he had destroyed a complete world; and whosoever preserves a single soul, Scripture ascribes merit to him as though he had preserved a complete world." The text teaches us our individual deeds

effect the entire world, that each action that we perform can either create or destroy; can enhance or diminish; can make this world a better place or do the opposite. It is up to us.

Which one will it be? How shall we live our lives? Will we, at the end of our days, state like Sam Walton “ I blew it?” Or, will we have judged our lives as being successful in terms of creating positive models for those who wish to emulate us? The Mishna teaches us and the date of Rosh Hashana emphasizes that each individual has an enormous role to play in the future of the world.

One of our good friends is Danny Siegel, who is known as the Mitzvah Man. For countless summers Danny has met USY Pilgrimage in Israel and taught the teenagers on the trip how one person can make a difference. He has created the category of Mitzvah Heroes, people who make a difference in this world by simply being compassionate, caring and kind human beings. “They are,” according to Danny, “experts because they are in the thick of changing lives by small, medium and large mitzvah deeds.” Danny believes that they understand well the statement in Ruth Rabbah: “When a good person is in a community, that person is its radiance, its glory and its brilliance.” All of them understand well the statement in Mishna Sanhedrin: “If you save one human life, you save an entire world.”

Many of us who have been to Jerusalem have gone to a place called Yad LaKashish, Lifeline for the Old. It was established by Miriam Mendilow, who for many years was a most highly respected teacher in Israel’s schools. In her early 50’s she recognized that one person could change the lives of both the elderly and the young alike. She convinced the Ministry of Labor to supply a teacher, someone to teach bookbinding to elderly people. From this simple beginning she managed to get a room for a workshop and, over time, create a place for the elderly to feel useful and productive.

Many of us have bought Tallitot, Mezuzot, jewelry, needlework and embroidery from the store that she established to sell the wares of the people who toil in the workshop. All of these people have found a reason to get up in the morning, to learn a new skill and to be productive members of society. A few weeks ago one of our B’nai Mitzvah boys proudly wore a Tallit he selected from the shop.

A few years ago in this Congregation we were introduced to the story of Ranya Kelly, who in a suburb of Denver began to rummage through dumpsters. Most of the time she visited dumpsters near shoe stores and found more than 500 pairs of shoes. She called the company’s local office in Denver and asked why some of stores would intentionally destroy their shoes rather than donate them to needy people. The reply was that it was the company’s policy to throw them away so that people would not come back and ask for cash or credit.

Ranya checked with the police and they said it was not the shoe store’s property once it was put in a dumpster. It belonged to the trash collection people and when she called them they were more than happy to allow her to take what she had found as long as she didn’t scatter junk all over the place. She started making the rounds of other

dumpsters and picked up perfectly good items, including mattresses, furniture and blankets that she took to shelters. Finally, she was able to convince the shoe store chain, whose dumpster she had first visited, to turn over to her the shoes for distribution. Thousands of pairs of shoes, mattresses and other thrown away items are now being used by needy people in her community.

One last story: Not too many people thought that Uri Lupoliansky was a good Mayor of the City of Jerusalem. But everyone extolled his compassion and his ability to make a difference in the lives of others. Lupoliansky started Yad Sarah which is a project that lends medical equipment for free to anyone who needs it in Israel. People from all sectors of Israeli society take advantage of Yad Sarah. It began in 1979 and now has 103 branches in Israel run by more than 6,000 volunteers and saves the Israeli economy about \$320 million a year in hospitalization and medical costs. Its best known service is the lending of medical and rehabilitative equipment on a short-term basis to anyone who needs it – from a stock of over 250,000 items, from crutches and wheel chairs to oxygen concentrators and electronic monitors. It has been of service even to my family. Three years ago, when Bryna broke her foot just before she joined me in Israel, we weren't sure how she would be able to get around on the hills of Jerusalem. One of our first trips was to Yad Sarah where she received a walker and a cane. My children in Modiin have used a portable crib when the babies were born and returned it when they were ready to buy one on their own.

It all began when Lupoliansky, a young Jerusalem high school teacher with a growing family, needed to borrow a vaporizer from a neighbor for a sick child. Discovering that such appliances were hard to find, he bought a few to lend to others, and people starting dropping off items they no longer needed. Soon his small apartment was overflowing with a variety of the kind of things people needed for only a short period of time. When he saw that there was a real need for this kind of help, in 1976 he incorporated the Yad Sarah organization, named for his grandmother who had perished in the Shoah. From this simple beginning, today it is estimated that one out of every two families has been helped by Yad Sarah. Over 380,000 Israeli families use its services yearly. Lupoliansky may not have been a great Mayor, but he is a wonderful human being. On that, there is no argument anywhere in Israel.

In each of these cases, and there are so many more, one person made a difference in the world. Refusing to take no for an answer or to surmount difficult hurdles, they changed life for so many people. Danny Siegel calls them “Mitzvah Heroes” and we agree. We need not be rich financially, none of these people were, but we can change the world for the good if we care about another human being and reach out and touch them with kindness.

There is a story told of a youngster who was never able to find things he needed when he got up in the morning. One night he decided that before retiring he would write himself a note that would read: “My hat is in the closet, my books are on the desk, my shoes are under the chair and I am in bed.” When he got up and began to collect his belongings, he found everything but the final item on the list. When he went to look for

himself in the bed, he wasn't there. Sometimes when we look for ourselves and the meaning of life we get way-laid by the smaller details of material things and unimportant items. As God's partner in the story of creation we have a role in perfecting the world by making it a better place for all.

What present can we give ourselves on this our birthday? We can pledge to make the world a better place for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren. We can truly become God's partner in the creating of Divine sparks in this world and in enhancing human life. While it sounds like a great challenge, all we need to do is follow the examples of Miriam Mendilow, Ranya Kelly and Uri Lupoliansky who individually made a momentous difference in this world by just being caring and compassionate people.

In 1904, a contest was held by Brown Book Magazine. The competition was to answer the question: "What is success?" in 100 words or less. Bessie Anderson Stanley won the first prize of \$250.00 with his poem:

"He has achieved success who has lived well, laughed often and loved much;
who has enjoyed the trust of pure women;
the respect of intelligent men and the love of little children;
who has filled his niche and accomplished his task;
who has left the world better than he found it
whether by an improved poppy, a perfect poem, or a rescued soul;
who has never lacked appreciation of Earth's beauty or failed to express it;
who has always looked for the best in others and given them the best he had;
whose life was an inspiration; whose memory a benediction."

Let us give ourselves a birthday present today and commit to following the values present in living this type of successful life. Not only will we then recognize at the end of our time that we will lived a meaningful life, but others will see it as such as well and we will have lived up to our God-given task here on earth.