

The Power of the Value of Compassion

By Rabbi Michael Schwab (RH Eve 5775)

A story is told of an American Jew who travels to Israel for a visit. On the first day of his arrival his tour guide takes him to the Western Wall, the *Kotel*, one of the holiest places of the Jewish people. He is amazed at the beauty of the old city, the ancient ramparts of the Zion gate, the curvy narrow stone streets and walkways that weave through the Jewish quarter and he marvels at the scene before him as he makes his way down into the *Kotel* plaza. He gazes at the peaceful and majestic wall made from glowing Jerusalem stone. As he descends the steps and approaches, a feeling of awe and connection encompasses him. As he touches the wall and his fingers brush its contours he utters the *Shemah* and he feels at peace.

He then lifts his eyes and begins to notice the *people* that are around him. Some are bearded dark-clothed Hasidim, others kippahed yeshivah boys, and there are, of course, a whole variety of tourists of all stripes and backgrounds. But there is one man who stands apart. He appears both ancient and ageless and his skin emits a certain glow,

almost as if he is reflecting the wall itself. The American is drawn to him and they begin to talk. After pleasantries are exchanged he cannot help himself and asks the man directly, “There is something magnificent about you, you seem to glow, as if a gentle warm fire is alight inside of you. How can that be?” The man smiles at the American and says, “Let me tell you a story.”

“When I was a boy in Poland, my parents decided it was time for us to leave and to make *aliyah* - to come here to the Holy Land. On the Shabbat before we left we went to visit the Rebbe to say our goodbyes and receive his blessing. The Rebbe was kind and insisted we stay with him. After the Shabbat meal, when it was time to go to bed, I was told that I would sleep in the Rebbe’s study on a mattress on the floor. And so I did. But I did not drift to sleep right away and at some point in the night the Rebbe came in. I did not stir and he thought I was asleep. He looked at me and said aloud to himself, “What a beautiful child. But it is a chilly night and he has no blanket. He must be cold. So the Rebbe

took off his own coat and tucked it gently around me so as not to disturb my slumber. And as he did so he lightly kissed my forehead.”

“And it is from that coat and from that kiss that I am still warm today. And it is from this warmth, which I cherish and spread each and every day, that any glow you see emitting from me now, exists”. And as he concluded the story he enwrapped the American in a warm embrace and gently kissed him on the head.

What I shared with you was my adaptation of a beautiful Hasidic story that sets the perfect tone for the beginning of the *Yamaim Noraim*, the days of awe, reflection and sanctity that lie ahead. It is a story about return, about Israel, about holiness, about love, about kindness about God and perhaps even about the meaning of life. In many ways we are all seeking that glow, which the man in the story possessed - perhaps particularly at this time of year. We want to uncover the spiritual secret to serenity, wholeness and happiness. Yet what is so powerful about the story is that the source of the glow, the answer to this great spiritual question, is not found through a nirvana-like experience. The glow does

not come as the culmination of a personal *individual* journey of fulfillment. Instead the glow of the man at the wall was created from an act of true spiritual love and caring, during which one human being performed an act of compassion for another. And this act was not just a simple form of kindness but in the story this act was purposefully given form in the character of the deeply religious Rebbe, in the sanctity of his study, a great symbol of the wisdom of the Jewish tradition. Therefore this act was imbued with a profound spiritual expression of our belief in the Divinity of all human beings, a Jewish understanding of our role as partners with God and our *religious* duty to consciously act each day with these truths in mind.

In other words, assumed in the act of the Rebbe was that in performing that good deed, he was consciously serving as an extension of God and of God's care for all. And that the boy lying before him was not just a boy, but another creation of God who was deserving of the Rebbe's love and care. What is more, the story implies that it was *because* of the Rebbe's commitment to Jewish tradition, *through* the

study of our texts and values and through the practice of our rituals, that he was inspired to act; that he was able to see the boy in such a manner that night. In living a life dedicated to the performance of *mitzvot*, which are concrete expressions of value-driven behavior, he was both in the position to perform this deed of love and also understood the importance of actually carrying it out.

The High Holiday experience and atmosphere can mirror the spiritual truth of this story. We too come together, as a sacred community, supporting one another. We phrase our prayers in the plural, standing as one, in solidarity with each other as we are judged. On these days, we express our love and gratitude to God and to one another. And we pledge to all, to live by our values, to strive to be a better person, to make the world a better place, to spread the glow from one person to the next. We do all of this in the context of our synagogue, our *religious* home, in which we engage in our traditions, study our texts, give voice to our prayers and embrace our loved ones. In the coming days, throughout the year and across our lifetimes may we

continue to use our heritage to discover the true sacred potential that lies within each of us, and within our community as a whole. And may we continue to act towards each other with love and compassion as the fulfillment of our role both as God's creations, and partners. *Shanah Tovah U'metukah* – May this year be one filled with goodness and blessing for us all and may we resolve to be the willing agents of God to help this prayer come true in the upcoming year. Amen.