

## “Good at Heart” - YK Sermon 5783\*

Perhaps the most well known quote in *all* of Holocaust literature comes from Anne Frank’s diary. Hidden away in an attic, while the Nazis hunted down the Jews in her community, she famously wrote, “Despite everything, I believe that people are really **good** at heart.” Coming from *her*, written during *that* time, her belief in humanity has inspired millions of people to have restored faith in the nature of human beings, even amidst great tragedy. *This* year marks *eighty* years since Anne penned her first entry into her diary in 1942. Since then it has been translated into English and almost every other language on earth, has been featured in multiple films and it has even made it to Broadway. That famous quote, reflecting, as well, the overall message of the diary, is *impossibly* uplifting - a message of deep faith in humanity amidst one of history’s greatest horrors. It seems likely that what made this quote so well-loved over the generations is that Ann Frank’s beautiful words allow us to transform an unspeakably *painful* narrative into an optimistic, comforting message.

*And yet*, her inspirational words, written with the weight of their context, begs the question, the foundational critical question: *Are* human beings *really* good at heart? As my friend and colleague, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove points out in his writings on this subject: it is fair to wonder how it was possible for Anne to judge humanity so generously considering all that was happening in the world around her. In fact, he notes, Deborah Lipstadt publicly wondered the very same thing. She wrote that perhaps it is significant that Anne penned that famous line *before* her experiences in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belson. It is *telling* that her last entry was August 1, 1944, three days *before* her

family's arrest, *before* the betrayal of her neighbors. As Cosgrove wrote, "Would she, in the midst of Bergen-Belsen, having watched her beloved sister die of starvation, disease and exposure to the elements, have *maintained* such an outlook?"

It is reasonable to believe that she might *not* have. *There*, she was exposed to the most extreme degradation and was subject to the most terrible abuses carried out by fellow human beings. However, back in Amsterdam, while she was writing her diary, even amidst the *awful* things going on *around* her, she *personally* experienced the *kindness* of her neighbors who kept their location hidden from the Nazis and who provided food and other assistance to help keep them alive for many months at the risk of their *own* lives.

What this teaches us is that what likely allowed Anne Frank to write about the **goodness** of people, even while tragedy *surrounded* her, was the fact that she, *personally*, at the time of writing, was the recipient of *individual* acts of great generosity, bravery, and compassion. Each day she was the beneficiary of extraordinary acts of kindness and as a result, her very positive view of humanity. As Rabbi Cosgrove wrote, ". . . she did not judge humanity by judging the moral condition of Europe's population. Rather, what determined Anne's estimation of the whole was derived from the very smallest sample – one, two or three individuals upon whom her verdict for all of humanity rested." In other words, and to generalize the insight: *our* attitude about the world and the goodness of people writ large, is actually based primarily on the deeds of the *individuals* with which we personally come into contact. Said more poignantly, the way you and I behave towards the people in our

lives literally shapes the moral condition of the *entire* world in which we live.

Today is Yom Kippur, when *we* reflect on our *own* deeds and when *all of humanity* stands before Gd in judgment. There are no secrets today between us and Gd, and we further strive to make sure that today there is also no barrier between our *own* awareness of our deeds and the truth of our actions. We have certainly harmed others; and just as certainly others have hurt us. So, *are* we actually “good at heart”? Perhaps we need to address that question by asking two others: have the actions we have taken this past year contributed to creating a world that gives *others* faith in humanity? Or have we consistently failed to live up to our aspirations for ourselves as being compassionate, kind, forgiving and loving?

These are difficult questions to answer. Thus, today, we gather together to gain *strength* from each other, to be inspired by our tradition, our values, our Torah and our community. To draw from the power of this sacred day in order to affirm, to proclaim with all of our hearts and souls, that we **are indeed “good at heart”** as Anne wrote - that each of us can, through our daily individual deeds, build a world worthy of Anne’s quote, to tip the balance in favor of goodness in the eyes of the people of the world and in the eyes of Gd.

In fact, the idea that our individual daily acts are what tip the balance between good and evil, is championed in the writings of our most quoted Sage, when it comes to the laws of Yom Kippur - those of the Rambam, or Maimonides. As I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, the Rambam gives us very clear guidelines about how to effect *teshuvah*,

repentance. What is less known, though, is the theology upon which his guidance is based. For Maimonides believed that each person, **at each moment**, is to consider themselves as *personally* equally balanced between merit and sin. For example, if you feel that you have generally been a good person, you *cannot* rely on that track record when contemplating your *next* choice. The last good deed will *not* cancel a future negative one. Alternatively, if you are not proud of your recent actions, you cannot let your *negative* view of your past behavior influence the *upcoming* decision. You *always* have the potential for good and can choose it at *any* time. Therefore, in each moment you must see your *next* action as the one that could tip the balance between *your* goodness and your potential for evil.

But even more than that, he writes that our deeds have implications *way beyond ourselves and Gd's individual judgment of us*. He states that a person who commits a sin, *tips* the balance of goodness toward *destruction*, not just for themselves, but for the whole world. And so too, with the performance of a *mitzvah*, a person's good deed can tip the entire world towards redemption.

On the one hand, this seems logical, right? But, on the other, when you think about it, this is an astounding theological claim. *One* deed, good or bad, can save or destroy the *whole* world. One deed. Imagine if we inhabited this mindset before each choice we made?! Maimonides, with an insight before his time, one that cognitive therapists today would likely affirm, is that for better and for worse, we human beings have a tendency to generalize from very limited individual interactions towards *far-reaching* conclusions about humanity. When a person wrongs us, it is not only *that* person whom we judge, but the act they

committed somehow becomes a referendum on everyone, or at least a group of people. Or alternatively, a kindness that someone performs, as in the case of Anne Frank's protectors, has the capacity to *redeem* our perception of the world. Think of your own lives, this happens all the time, to us and others; single actions tip the balance of how we, as individuals, characterize humanity as a whole.

Thus, each of us, you and me, *literally* have the power, over and over again, to make the world a better place -- not as a platitude but as a practical human reality. We hold *enormous* power, which we can meaningfully wield each and every day.

I want to share with you two stories that demonstrate how we indeed have the ability to change the world one small act at a time. The first is about me and the other about someone a bit more well-known, the Biblical Joseph . First, my story. When I graduated college I spent a year in Israel staffing the Conservative movement's gap year program, called Nativ, and studying at the Conservative Movement Yeshivah in Jerusalem. As part of Nativ, my students and I spent time living on Kibbutz Saad, near Ashkelon and the Gaza strip (back then in 1998 it was a peaceful area). But some of my studies were back in Jerusalem. So at least once a week I took a sherut, a shared taxi, to and from the Kibbutz. The shared taxi that transported me to Jerusalem and back was essentially a large van that picked up people at various locations, drove at breakneck speed to Jerusalem, dropped us off near the central bus station and then did the reverse on the way home.

One Friday after work, but before Shabbat, I panicked. I couldn't find my wallet anywhere. My money, ID cards, credit cards, were all

inside the wallet and I was in a foreign country. I looked everywhere and concluded that the most likely place to have lost it was on the *sherut* that I took the day before, as I remembered having taken my wallet out to pay when I got on. I called the company but it was too close to Shabbat and there was no answer. Now I have lost things before in public places in New York or Philly and sadly they have never been found. So my hopes were not high. Therefore, I cannot tell you how overjoyed, relieved and surprised I felt, when that Sunday morning I got a call from the guard booth at the kibbutz that something had been dropped off for me. The Sherut driver had gone out of his way to stop at the kibbutz first thing that morning, even though he did not have a pick up there that day, to return my wallet, which was found on the floor of the van by a customer on Friday, who turned it into the driver right away. And it did not have one shekel missing. The driver took the time to check the wallet, match my picture to my face, and resolved to get it back to me as soon as possible after Shabbat, even though he had other things going on and it was my own fault for losing my wallet. Two small acts, one by the passenger and one by the driver. But the feeling those acts gave me was overwhelming. I was so grateful and also experienced a wonderful feeling of faith in humanity -- that there are people in the world who are willing to go out of their way to do a *mitzvah* for a stranger. They didn't have to -- but they did! And the truth of the impact of these tiny deeds of kindness is that I have consistently told this story to people for the last 20 plus years. Yes, it was a **small** act of compassion, especially in the face of the problems of the world, but it gave me faith in the potential for kindness and *menschlichkeit* in the world at large.

For my second story I turn to the famous activist, author, thinker and Holocaust survivor, Elie Weisel, who liked to speak about the Biblical character of Joseph. Joseph's story, too, points out our ability to restore goodness to society with an act of kindness, in this case, apropos to today, with an act of forgiveness. And the story highlights the flip side of Maimonides' wisdom that past actions should *not* preclude future goodness. As you will recall, Joseph's own brothers plotted to murder him and then eventually sold him into slavery in Egypt, telling their father that he was killed by a wild beast. And years later, they *never* looked for him; *never* told the truth about what happened; *never* tried to make things right. And then when Joseph became the most powerful man in Egypt next to Pharaoh, his brothers came before him not knowing they were speaking to Joseph, begging for food to save their family from the famine in the land. Joseph could have done *anything he wanted* to his brothers - anything at all. What did he do? I quote from the Torah: "He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, he whom you sold into Egypt. Now do not be distressed or reproach yourselves because you sold me here, it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you . . . so it was not *you* who sent me here but Gd . . . ' with that he embraced his brother Benjamin and kissed all his brothers and wept upon them" (end quote). Wow! Not only did he *not* take revenge, not only did he *not* even make them feel guilty (you have to wonder what kind of Jewish upbringing he had), but he told them their heinous act was somehow the work of Gd. And then he literally embraced them and invited them all to live like royalty with him in Egypt. This is what Weisel had to say about Joseph, (quote) "he succeeded in vanquishing his bitterness and . . . transforming it into inspiration and love . . . [Through this] he became a reconciled, happy man." Weisel explains

that for Joseph, and therefore for us, (quote) “There is a rare virtue in *forgoing* justified reprisals, *overcoming* well-founded bitterness. It is not easy to resist dealing out deserved punishment.” Only a *tzaddik*, [a truly righteous person] forgives without forgetting. Joseph is known as a *tzaddik* in our tradition, not just because he kept his faith in Gd. He is a *tzaddik* because given every reason to give in to his hatred, he kept his faith in humanity. “What does this all mean [for us]?” Weisel asks the reader. “That one is not *born* a *tzaddik*; one must strive to *become* one. And having become a *tzaddik*, one must strive to *remain* one”.

As you can see, Weisel is teaching us through Joseph the very same lesson we learn from Anne Frank and from Maimonides, that each moment we must battle for goodness and with each act we can build a world of holiness. *Every* choice, *every* action, large or small, matters. We are not born a righteous *tzaddik*, nor a wicked person. Who we are and what the world becomes is truly, truly up to us. Weisel, like Joseph, chose faith in humanity over hate and anger by leaving behind vengeance and living a life that embodies a willingness to forgive, as well as an accompanying commitment to righteousness. As many of you know, whether it was in Argentina, Tibet, Cambodia or Nicaragua, or whether it was for the Jewish people in the former Soviet Union, in Israel or any Jew facing anti-Semitism around the world, Weisel was a model in his life for transcending tremendous personal pain and taking action in the world to replace acts of evil with acts of kindness, transforming the faith of so many in humanity. Weisel is an inspiration to us because he was able to choose, over and over again, to tip the balance of the world towards goodness even though he had experienced so much evil in his own life. He demonstrated through his actions that people can indeed be “Good at heart”.

And folks, I really do believe that, in general, people *are* good at heart, just as Anne Frank wrote. I know this from my own experience with my fellow human beings and I know this because the Torah tells us that we are made in Gd's image. But I do admit that one could find plenty of evidence to suggest otherwise. You and I both know that for every wallet returned, there is at least one that is not. And for every person that is able to transcend anger and forgive, there is at least one person that remains bent on revenge. And we know that there are people out there who have done unspeakable things to fellow human beings. Though, I believe that if we stay in touch with the core of who we are, with our Gd-given soul. If we study our values, meditate on them through prayer, and keep them in mind when we act, we will *remain* good at heart. What we make of our lives *is* up to us. That is why the Talmud explains that when a child is conceived, an angel brings the fetus before God. The angel asks, "Will this child be tall or short? God decrees their height. "Will this child be smart or not?" God decrees their intellectual capacity. Then the angel asks, "Will this child be good or bad?" And God is silent. Why? Because whether we are good at heart or not, the choice to live a good life is entirely up to us. The choice to build a world in which we have faith in humanity, is entirely in our hands.

So which world do *we* want to create? Because all of us here feel that someone has let us down in the past year. We have all been wronged, hurt, offended or slighted. Every single one of us has had our faith in humanity questioned. And, therefore, we could, if we chose to, do what would be altogether understandable, "justified" even, as Weisel said, to let the misdeed of another change our view of humankind and pull us toward committing destructive deeds ourselves, fueled by our

righteous anger, resentment and disappointment. It happens all the time.

But we **do** have a choice. Living in a reality filled with rights and wrongs, good and bad, kindness and hurt, we *could* allow for the possibility that that one wrong **need not** be a referendum on an entire person, or even more so on humanity as a whole. We do not have to judge people by their worst actions. We could, if we resolved to, choose to see a world filled with people who, like ourselves, while capable of mistakes and misdeeds, sometimes even bad ones, are not *fundamentally* bad. People who *can* improve and grow and are deserving of forgiveness. Few people say about *themselves*, “I made a single mistake, or even a number of them, so I must be fundamentally flawed and beyond hope.” And yet we often fall into the trap of viewing others that way. Certainly on a day like today, when we pray that Gd see beyond our own particular shortcomings, *see* that despite what we did this past year we *are* actually good at heart, we can use that very same rationale to grant forgiveness to others.

On Yom Kippur we get to decide in which world we want to live. A world in which we see the best in people: their potential, their possibility. Or a world in which is irredeemably mired in the misdeeds of the past. That is why we will read the book of Jonah this afternoon. The people of the city of Nineveh had just repented from their evil ways, God had forgiven its citizens, the city was saved and Jonah sat on a hill nearby overlooking Ninveh, reflecting on what happened. Sadly, instead of joy or relief at the successful *teshuvah* of the residents there, Jonah is distraught at the thought that God could be so forgiving to a people who had so recently been judged to be wicked.

Instructively for us, Gd becomes *upset* with Jonah for this attitude and gives him, and therefore us, an explicit message: We are to welcome the teshuvah of others; as often as possible we take the positive acts of others and help them build on them. Of course there are times for consequences and punishments. But never lose sight of the end game and our foundational belief in the potential for goodness in humanity. Rabbi Cosgrove points out that today, like Jonah, we sit on that hill – staring out at our relationships, at our lives and we ask that very same question of human-kind - can a world that has provided us at times with hurt, injustice and anguish be redeemed? And we must do the very thing that Jonah could not do. We must answer, yes! We must summon our qualities of being made in the Divine image; we must channel the inner strength of Joseph and we must forgive!

And we must act! One small act of compassion and righteousness at a time. If you have a fight with a relative or friend, perhaps *you* should **be the one** to reach past the hurt and call, before the relationship becomes impossibly strained. You not only redeem the relationship but maybe the next generation of relationships as well. If a colleague or friend needs your help, even during a time you are busy, **take the few minutes** and assist as best you can. It will make a difference to you, to them and to anyone who *witnesses* the act. If someone you know is in a hospital, even one that is not “on the way” to any place you are already going, **take the time to visit**. It matters. When someone approaches you to ask a question of you that you find irritating, or makes a request of you that you feel is unfair, **answer considerately and respectfully**, even if you need to say no. It helps. If there is an injustice in the world which needs fighting, **take the time to help and make a contribution**. It is

impactful. And when you have the opportunity to forgive, to see in humanity the possibility for teshuva, redemption and goodness, **do it**. It may just tip the balance not only for you, and for them, but for the entire world.

Our deeds, large and small, have the capacity to substantively change the lives of others and the world around us. Yes, our world is filled with both good and bad. We surely witness small wrongs and large ones, some that should be forgiven right away and those that are tough for us to reconcile. A good word to a friend, a meal dropped off for a neighbor or any small act of kindness for that matter, will not, in and of itself, right the wrongs in the world. But it will help lessen the pain. It will plant a seed of love. It will help build a foundation of goodness. And it will restore other's faith in humanity. Each of us has the choice to decide how we want to shape the world we live in; each of us has the choice of what kind of world we want to make. As Rabbi Cosgrove noted, "Nobody," wrote Anne Frank, "needs to wait a single moment before starting to improve the world." May we, beginning today, fill our world with as many small and large acts of kindness, compassion and forgiveness as we possibly can. And by doing so we will surely tip this world closer to redemption! *Ken Yhi Ratzon! Gmar Hatimah Tovah!*

\*Special thanks to Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove on whose writings this sermon is based.