

"THE TOYVAS OF LIFE"

Erev Yom Kippur 5768 – Friday, September 21, 2007

Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach once told the story of a Jewish hunchback street sweeper he met in Tel Aviv. This hunchback had lived in the Warsaw Ghetto and at the age of 11, was deported to Auschwitz. Asking how he survived, the hunchback answered:

"When I came to Auschwitz, I knew my whole family had been killed. I wanted to die myself. Yet, each time I was about to take my own life, I suddenly heard my rebbe's voice inside me [reminding me of the lesson I had learned in the ghetto]. 'Precious child,' it would say, 'remember, the greatest thing in the world is to do somebody a favor, a **toyva**.' Do you know how many favors you can do in Auschwitz late at night? People dying, people crying. I would go from one person to another and would ask why they were crying, They would tell me about their children, about their wives whom they would never see in this life again. I would hold their hands and cry with them. I would be up all night.

Since then, I have wanted to die many times, but each time I hear my rebbe's voice. Now I'm here in Tel Aviv. I'm all alone. Sometimes I go to the sea up to my nose. I want to die, but always I hear that voice [of my rebbe]. I run back into the streets."

At this point in his tale, the hunchback looked deeply into Carlebach's eyes,

and asked rhetorically, "Do you know how many favors you can do on the street?"¹

* * *

On this night of Kol Nidre, we are asked to looked into our souls. We chastise ourselves for having fallen down in our humanity. We challenge ourselves to be better at life. We choose to reach beyond our own egocentric needs and desires.

Whether we believe a word of our prayers – whether we suppose there is an Eternal Judge who determines our destinies for the coming year, deciding who will live and who will die – whether the statement of Kol Nidre holds any power over us – there is one truth which none of us can deny – good deeds, favors – or as Carlebach's hunchback called them – **toyvas**, are the secret to life.

When we think of such favors and good deeds, we imagine enormous, take-your-breath-away acts and we cannot conceive how we can performs acts on that order of goodness. People like Raoul Wallenberg or Oscar Schindler come to mind. Albert Schweitzer, Jonas Salk, Mother Teresa...their **toyvas** are monumental. How can we compare? Even the goodness of Carlebach's hunchback, helping the dying and hopeless in Auschwitz, startles us with its

power. Any **toyvas** we perform pale in comparison. Or do they?

* * *

Many years ago, I was privileged to spend a month in Pretoria, South Africa, serving as a rabbi-in-residence for a liberal congregation. Halfway into my stay, a rabbi from Johannesburg invited me to dinner at his home. A congregant from Pretoria kindly lent me a car...accompanied by all types of warnings to keep my doors locked and – to the best of my ability – never stop driving. It was still the time of apartheid. Every day, I read of violence – black on black, black on white, and carjackings at stoplights and intersections were popular activities.

My trip to Johannesburg proceeded without incident, and on my way home, in the middle of a long, dark, and lonely stretch of highway, I felt a tire blow. Quickly, I pulled over to the side. Examining the damage, I went to the trunk to pull out the spare. It was flat. At that moment, a car approached. Heeding my congregant's warnings, I quickly returned to the car and locked the doors. The car stopped just behind mine. Four huge black men stepped out and surrounded my car. One thumped on the window, indicating for me to roll it down. With trepidation, I did. He spoke in some African language. When I responded, "Do you speak English?" he reached into the car, and opened the door. He pulled me out, walked me to the back, and pointed to the flat. The only word he spoke was, "Tire." I showed him the flat spare. Without uttering another word, he took me by the arm, forced me in the back seat of their car, and the five of us drove off. I had no idea what was happening. We slowed

down about a mile later, and pulled into a service station along the road. An hour later, the spare had been filled, the tire changed. As they prepared to leave, I offered them and the service station attendant money. The only other words I understood that entire evening were spoken then by the driver, "No money. Friends." And they took off, leaving me to return to Pretoria shaking, shocked and amazed. A **toyva**. A good deed.

* * *

Exactly one year ago tonight, I stood here and spoke about the first cousin to goodness, the need to care. Following that sermon, many people responded saying that they cared, and that I could give the woman I spoke about their name. But a number of folks responded quite differently. They recognized that caring requires empathy, connection, personal involvement. For them, it was overwhelming to add another responsibility to their already demand-filled life. One woman said, "I have two elderly parents – one with congestive heart failure, another with beginning stages of Alzheimer's. My three children constantly need me to support them in their activities and my husband has just started his own business. I just can't be on a list to call. Not now."

Caring demands effort and sacrifice, a rather high level of personal commitment. And I realize, a year later, that these two sermons – last year's and tonight's – were given in the wrong order. As Emuna Braverman, a writer at aish.com points out, giving – doing favors both small and large – **leads** to caring. "You give, you care," she writes. "It's a basic Jewish principle. While some may think the opposite is true, one look at the relationship between parents

and children quickly clears things up. Since parents are the primary givers (the giving begins before the child is even born!), our love for our children is profoundly deeper than their love for us...Yes they love us; they may even express their caring through...the occasional phone call and the odd Hallmark card, but the basic equation is unequal."² As a result of our giving, we then – over time – care immeasurably more.

In our tradition, we are taught that there is a group of 36 people who do **toyvas** – who give – all the time. Our world is sustained through their actions. They are called the Lamed-Vav-niks. Lamed-vav stands for 36, double-chai, 18 times 2. And based on a Talmudic legend,³ were it not for these 36 righteous people, even if one were to be missing, the world would come to an end.

I do not believe that there are really 36 individual human beings in the world who keep our existence from imploding. But I believe in the idea. And I trust that **we** are part of those 36, that we have the ability – through our individual acts of **toyva** – to make our world a much better place to be, a place where caring can eventually emerge from our giving. Yes, **toyva**, goodness, is at the core of the Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe.

* * *

While I have told this story before, I repeat it tonight. For it represents the best of **toyva**, of goodness.

While in Ethiopia this past January, I had no skills to offer at Mother Teresa's mission, a refuge for Ethiopia's most desperate and dying. And so, I spent my days volunteering by shaving hair, cut-

ting nails, and giving body massages. One afternoon, I took nail clippers and walked around offering to trim finger and toe nails. One older gentleman nodded and I sat down next to him, me clad with latex gloves and protective white lab coat. He placed his hand in mine. I was shocked by what I saw. There were five fingers, but three were terribly misshapen. He insisted I cut the nails on all the fingers. I struggled, unable to get the trimmer to catch the odd-shaped nails. He looked up and saw that I was sweating with panic out of my own ineptitude. He placed his hand on mine, looked at me, and in Amharic said, "Slowly...slowly." I concentrated and got one nail cut...and the next...and the next. When I finished, I smiled at him. He smiled back...then he took my hand, started to pull off my glove, and gestured to let him cut my nails. His hands were covered with a horrible-looking black and white fungus. What should I do? I looked up. There was hope and anticipation and love in his eyes. So...I took off my gloves and sat as an elderly Ethiopian brother trimmed my nails. When we finished, he reached into his small cloth bag of earthly possessions he carried with him - a bag no larger than a softball - pulled out a tin ring and placed it on my finger. I was speechless. A **toyva** of the first order...not by me, but by an elderly, dying Ethiopian.

* * *

My friends, God appears in the strangest of places. We often are unaware that we are part of the 36 righteous of the world. But when we discover we are, let us be open to the opportunities to bring goodness into the lives of others. Let us take off our gloves, unmask our faces,

open our souls...and allow the goodness that rests within to flow into the world. I hope many of you are familiar with the book, and subsequent movie, *Pay It Forward*, for it presents the notion of **toyvas** in a simple and entertaining manner.

The teacher of a middle school class "starts a movement with a voluntary, extra-credit assignment: THINK OF AN IDEA FOR WORLD CHANGE, AND PUT IT INTO ACTION." ⁴ Trevor, the 12-year-old hero of the story comes up with an idea, where he will do something good for three people. And then when they ask how they can pay it back, he says they have to Pay It Forward to three more people. So nine people get helped. Then those nine help 3 each and it becomes 27, which turns into 81, then 243, then 729, then 2,187. The goodness grows exponentially.

The one difficulty I have with the story is the premise that one **has** to somehow pay it forward. Rather, **toyvas** should be done simply for goodness' sake. Just because we can. Just because we are there. That said, remember what Emuna Braverman said. Giving leads to caring. If we **give** our goodness out enough, undoubtedly others will find it contagious, and it will then spread as Trevor imagined.

* * *

Do you know how many **toyvas**, how many favors and acts of goodness you can do in the course of this new year? Surely, you can do just one. Can't you? What about 10, 20, even 36? Some may be spontaneous: holding an umbrella out for someone to share in the midst of a rain storm; standing in line and seeing someone in a hurry, and offering to ex-

change places. Some **toyvas** may be more deliberate: taking a moment to speak with the Wal-Mart greeter to see how **his or her** day is going; thinking of ways to enrich your co-workers lives – with help, with a listening ear, with flowers or that "extra" set of movie tickets you just "can't" use; giving your children gifts of time and attention. Some favors or acts of goodness might be reciprocal: something small, like offering the garbage collector or the postal worker cookies or a cup of hot chocolate on a cold winter day; or something huge, like becoming a Jewish big brother or big sister and changing a child's life.

I have set up a web blog. For those who have internet access, it is toyvas.blogspot.com. I invite you to go to that website throughout the coming year and post your own **toyvas** – either ones you do, ones done for you, or even ones that you witness. You don't have to put your name. But let's see just how many **toyvas** we, as a community, can log in one year.

* * *

John and Mr. Daves fished the same lake for over 15 years. A friendship developed. When Mrs. Daves died 5 years ago, leaving her husband alone, John offered to pick him up every time he went out to the lake. After a few years of this, Mr. Daves had a stroke, paralyzing his right side. He lost his speech, and was put into a nursing home. One day, John got permission from the nursing home to take Mr. Daves out for a ride. They were both excited to be together again but it was very painful for Mr. Daves to be lifted into John's truck, due to his partial paralysis. John worried about this but still they went out to-

gether every 10 days or so. John had gotten his truck a year earlier and it was the truck of his dreams, a real cowboy Cadillac. He came home one day and announced he was selling it so he could buy a van that was equipped for a wheelchair. He researched and found one. It wasn't sporty or fast but it sure eased Mr. Daves' pain on their outings. John even rigged up a special fishing rod that Mr. Daves could use so they still go fishing together at a nearby lake. Mr. Daves is getting old now...but is still enjoying life thanks to John.⁵

* * *

I was wrong last year. While caring is important, it is giving goodness, doing favors, offering **toyvas**, that is essential to life. We know it from our own experiences. We recognize it in a hunchback

who cries in empathy with those in pain. We learn it from strangers who help a stranded motorist on unfamiliar roads. We appreciate it in an old man who gently cuts another's nails. And we celebrate it with John, who adopts an acquaintance and turns him into family. Sometimes we care. But it begins because we are just willing to do a favor.

As we think of the coming year, of the opportunities it presents for each of us, may we keep a stack of **toyvas** in the pocket of our souls, some small, some large. When the moments present themselves, may we reach deep inside, pull one out, and enrich another. So doing, may we – like the 36 righteous of the world – do our part to bring healing, hope, and wholeness to humanity, to our world.

¹Bernie King, *Colorizing a World*; The American Rabbi; Spring 1996; Vol. 28, No. 3; p. 23

²Emuna Braverman; "Giving Leads to Caring"; http://www.aish.com/family/momblog/Giving_Leads_to_Caring.asp

³Tractate Sanhedrin 97b; Tractate Sukkah 45b)

⁴

<http://www.payitforwardfoundation.org/home.html>

⁵Debbie Anderson, "Random Acts of Kindness Stories";

<http://www.intouchmag.com/33kindnessstories2.html>