

YK5783 Boker

Standing Together: No One Left Behind

Recently, I was on a Zoom meeting with Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, whose anthologies of Jewish Wisdom are often used for our Lunch & Learn sessions. Telushkin shared with us a story about a person in need who approached a rabbi for some help before Passover. “Rabbi, please help me with a little *tzedakah* so I can purchase milk for Pesach.” The rabbi gave him 25 rubles, which was a considerable amount, the equivalent of about two months salary for a laborer. The rabbi’s students questioned him: “Why did you give him so much when all he asked for was money for milk?” The rabbi answered, “Since he asked for money for milk, that meant that he wasn’t able to afford meat for Passover (and his *seder* would be *milkick* and not much of a *seder* at all). And if he didn’t have enough even for Pesach, imagine what his family had to eat the rest of the year. Therefore, I wanted to give him enough to have a good Passover *seder* and to help his hungry family.”

The lesson is one of Moral Imagination. That is, responding to the real needs of a situation, understanding the depth of the unspoken pain and suffering that afflict people. Moral Imagination is our attempt to find solutions, or at least support, that go beyond the superficial.

Moral Imagination has nothing to do with how much we give. Rather, it is our attentiveness to the causes of the suffering. It is much more than sympathy. It is empathy. Sympathy can be a sense of pity for another person. Empathy is finding a feeling of connection with another person. Sympathy is a form of what Martin Buber might classify as an I-It relationship: an objectification of the other. Empathy is an I-Thou relationship: you feel a kinship with that person. It is imagining that you can actually feel what another is experiencing.

At the core of such attentiveness is the sense of connectiveness with one another. In Judaism, the ideal fulfillment is found not as an individual in isolation but in the embrace of community, family, and nation. It is through our relationships with family, friends, and community that we establish our point of reference and relevance, the background and setting of our identity, purpose, and meaning. And when we are down and struggling, when we reach one of those low points, it is the mitzvah, the moral obligation of family, friends, and the community to extend helping hands to those in need: hands filled with acts of physical, emotional, and spiritual support, acts that affirm the value and dignity of each person's life.

Earlier, we read the following passage from the book of Deuteronomy:

Atem nitzavim ha-yom, You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai your God: the heads of your tribes, your elders and officers, every Israelite - men, women, and children, the strangers in your camp, from the wood choppers to those who carry your water. All of you are here to enter into the sworn covenant which Adonai makes with you this day, in order that you may be established as God's people and Adonai will be your God (Deut. 29: :9-14).

No one is left out. The Torah's definition of "our" people includes all of those in our family and community. We should feel rightly proud of that inclusive tradition, one that is at the core of what it means to be a Reform Jew. As such, then we are motivated to consider those who may not feel so welcome or included. We must broaden our perspective in order to see those who may have fallen under our radar, those who need our help and attention but will only be seen if we expand our Moral Imaginations. This morning, I want to highlight some of the extraordinary ways Temple Sinai members are reaching out and making a positive difference; those who are demonstrating the highest ideal of Moral Imagination.

Arguably, the greatest health challenge facing society is mental wellness. The statistics are overwhelming. According to the CDC, 1 in 5 adults will experience a mental illness in a given year. One in 5 children, either

currently or at some point during their life, have had a seriously debilitating mental illness. And 1 in 25 Americans lives with a serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression. And for every person suffering a mental illness, there are the extended family and friends who are heroically supporting and struggling to help. One would think that with the enormous impact mental illness has on families this nation would do to more help. It goes without saying that we need to become stronger advocates for greatly increasing government funding for treatment centers and facilities, for research and financial aid to help relieve the crushing stress on families.

At Temple Sinai, we find many heroes who are helping to address the challenges of mental health and other important social issues. This morning of Yom Kippur, I want to mention a few because they are, for me and I hope for you, inspiring role models.

Diane Cushman Neal and her husband Scott Neal have established the Cushman Neal Family Wellness Fund. It was created to provide the Temple Sinai community with education, support, and tools to face dire challenges, such as the stress and anxiety of not having access to food or hygiene products. In partnership with Jewish Family Service, the Cushman Neal Family Wellness Fund will also help provide one-on-one counseling,

wellness and education panels, caregiver support, and grief support. It will also help to ensure that children experiencing Learning Differences are warmly and sensitively included in our school and community.

The Cushman Neal family also created Donations for Dignity, which is providing hygienic supplies for the tens of thousands here in Colorado who can't afford health products. 43% of women in Colorado cannot afford feminine hygiene products. 53% struggle to get basic hygiene products such as soap, toilet paper, and diapers. Note that in addition to today's donations of food that will go to the Jewish Family Service Weinberger Food Pantry, many of us brought hygienic products for Donations for Dignity. At Temple Sinai's entrance are two pink barrels for us to put in products that will help those in need. We have had hundreds of volunteers at Temple Sinai and throughout the community packaging hygienic products for women. In the coming year, I hope that you will consider participating in these packing parties.

Leadership of Moral Imagination has also been blessedly demonstrated by Marshall and Helene Abrahams through their support for enhanced security at Temple Sinai. In fact, they were the first to approach me when we were building the new school that Sinai needed to better protect our children and

members through the physical structure of the building and by hiring professional guards.

In turn, each Temple Sinai member contributes to that Security Fund through fees and dues. When it was first enacted, we didn't know what the reaction would be. Well, you responded with a concern for the safety and welfare of all.

An anonymous donor has made extraordinary financial contributions to the Security Fund and has helped us to establish a fund that will provide financial support for our Preschool teachers.

Another anonymous donor and many of you contributed to help the victims of the disastrous Marshall Fire this past January.

These are all leaders who are role modeling the highest values of Judaism: *Gemilut Chasadim*, loving kindness, and *Tzedakah*, charity and social justice.

And the list goes on! This community is blessed to have exemplars of *tzedakah* like Max and Elaine Appel who, in addition to providing crucial help to Temple Sinai and Jewish Family Service, also benefit organizations like FireFly, which serves families with loved ones who have Autism, and

Clinica Tepeyac, which provides medical help for undocumented people in the community.

And when the Russians first invaded Ukraine, forcing hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians to flee to Poland and other countries, Temple Sinai members connected with the JCC in Krakow in order to raise funds to help them feed and house the refugees. With Max and Elaine Appel leading the way, our congregation contributed nearly \$100,000 to help the Ukrainian refugees.

Speaking of which, the Denver Jewish community through JEWISHcolorado is raising \$300,000 as a part of a national \$46-million campaign to aid the Jewish refugees. As thousands try to escape from Ukraine and Russia because of Putin's brutal attack, we are organizing planes and other transportation to bring them to safety in Israel. Once there, they'll need housing and provisions. We are concurrently helping the remnant of the Jews of Ethiopia escape the civil war that is ravaging that country. The Ethiopian Jews are desperate to join loved ones and live in peace in Israel. JEWISHcolorado is pledging that 100% of the funds raised will go to the refuge efforts. Look for more information that will be forthcoming.

We have many other heroes in this congregation. There's a group of Temple Sinai members who have established the remarkable 100 Plus Jews Who Care fund. Jeff Robins, David Frieder, Debbie Fendrich, Marc Reissner and others are heading this organization that now has over 228 contributing members from Sinai and around the community. Last year they distributed close to \$90,000 to 11 Denver and Boulder nonprofit organizations. Every 4 months or so, members vote to support worthy projects and organizations that are helping people in need, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Each of you is welcome to join, contribute, and make a difference.

Moral Imagination is demonstrated at the highest level by those who go out and personally make a difference in the lives of others. We have so many groups that are doing this blessed work, and I beg you to forgive me for not being able to name all of you. But I want to highlight at least a few more.

Paul and Susan Levine have organized dozens of Temple Sinai members who prepare lunches for the homeless and others who are suffering from food insecurity. Every week our members (YOU!) prepare hundreds of lunches. Paul and Susan bring the lunches to Metro Caring to feed the hungry. In addition, they organize a group of Sinai members to distribute clothes, scarves, mittens, and other necessary supplies for the homeless

and the poor as our participation in the annual Christmas Mitzvah project. After the Holy Days, we'll be collecting again and seeking additional volunteers. Look for more information in the Sinai emails and on the website.

One cannot speak of hands-on difference makers without mentioning Jerry and Natalie Lassow and the many Temple Sinai members who make up our Caring Committee. Nancy Eisenberg is the Chairperson and in addition to the Lassows, we mention Grace Bach, Mimi Barnard, Vicki Baker, Wendy Glasser, Debbie Hostetler, Bobbi Kramer, Laurie Lavenhar, Barbara Lettes, Diane Cushman-Neal, Stephanie Podolak, Sharon Sloane, Joyce Spiegler, Wendy Vean, and Linda Weinstein. (Others have recently joined and more are welcome!) They deliver packages and loving support: welcoming new families and new babies, and bringing comfort to those who are going through illness or loss.

Moral Imagination certainly includes those like Lisa and Steve Friedman, who are our representatives on with Habitat for Humanity, helping to provide housing for families in need.

And Sinai members like Bobbie and Mark Kramer and Suzan and Allan Markman, Gary and Nancy Eisenberg, Margie Rashti, Barbara Glassman

along with so many others who rush to the aid of others and this community.

And we are blessed that the vast majority of our B'nei Mitzvah students dedicate time and energy to Mitzvah Projects that touch the lives of people locally and sometimes even globally. The kids are great, and special kudos to their parents and their families who encourage them and role model for them what it means to be a mensch. Speaking of which, one of our recent Confirmation students, who is working on becoming Eagle Scout, Joshua Weiner, organized a whole team of friends and family to build a garden platform for our Preschool kids.

Again, forgive me for cutting short my listing of the members of Temple Sinai who are doing acts of *Gemilut Chasidim*, acts of loving kindness that help others. In truth, every person here should be considered a participant in the mitzvah of Moral Imagination, responding to another's needs.

Acts of loving kindness are made in simple and quite ways. For instance, when we pause to listen and respond sensitively to another. After years of separation and disconnect, the loving act of warmly listening and responding is a blessing.

On Rosh HaShanah, I spoke about the wisdom we find in the metaphorical stories of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. To conclude this morning's address on Moral Imagination and loving kindness, I refer to a passage from an ancient Jewish book that has been all but lost to us.

The book is The Life of Adam and Eve. It is found in the Pseudepigrapha, a collection of ancient Jewish writings that were not included in the Biblical cannon. It midrashically expands the Adam and Eve story and provides details about their life before and after Eden. One passage that I found quite moving was when Adam and Eve are exiled and having the hardest time adjusting to their life in the harshness outside of Eden. They don't know how they can survive. So Adam pleads with the angels to intercede for him to God and ask that they might go back to Eden for something that would make life so much more pleasant and meaningful. He wants to go back for some of the spices and aromatic fragrances they found in Paradise. The spices would be used for incense to enhance the sacrifices as a tribute to God and to flavor food.

The prayer was granted and thus spices represent a taste of Eden to elevate our human existence. This hearkens to the spices we use at Havdalah, the concluding ceremony of Shabbat (and later today as we conclude Yom Kippur). The spices remind us that we can make a

difference in this world and bring a touch of Paradise to lift our lives and the lives of those around us.

We should think of every act of *tzedakah*, charitable justice, and *gemilut chasadim*, loving kindness, as similar to those blessed spices. Just as Adam and Eve knew that the spices were essential for reminding them of the sweetness of their origin, so every act of goodness brings hope and restores a sense of purpose and meaning for those who feel that the world is harsh and unyielding. Every kind act, every sweet gesture, every thoughtful gift of support is like the angelic gift that reestablishes a reminder of Eden for those who feel lost and forgotten.

God has given us the wherewithal to bring those blessings to our world. It is not enough to raise our voices in supplication for God to solve the ills of society. Rather, God has empowered us to bring healing and hope to the world.

I pray that each of us connects with that angelic role we can play to lift the downtrodden, feed the hungry, find housing for the homeless, and bring dignity to all.