

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah - G'mar Hatimah Tovah - May you be sealed in the Book of Life for a good year.

On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrated the birthday of the world. We enjoy this amazing planet, the ability to love, to laugh and to be in covenant with God. We emerged from slavery, wandered in the wilderness and learned to serve Adonai. An Iron Age tribe, we grew into a people chosen to serve, willing to take care of others, and to pursue justice.

The Torah says: (Lev. 19:36): **מֵאֲזוּנֵי צֶדֶק אֲבֵנֵי צֶדֶק אַפְתַּי צֶדֶק וְהֵינּוּ צֶדֶק** “ Just balances, just weights and just measures - Tzedek – justice: the root of the word tzedakah.

The Torah tells us to give money and material goods to the poor. Deuteronomy says: God loves the stranger and gives him food and clothing (10:18).

There is no limit for hesed, loving kindness, that we can do: visiting the sick, taking care of the poor, attending to the dead - all expressions of human sympathy and kindness. The midrash calls hesed, acts of loving kindness one of the fundamentals of Judaism."

(Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:1).

And when we engage in hesed, we live out Jewish values at the highest level. Here at Kol Shofar, I see acts of loving kindness every day; in the rooms of our synagogue, with our children, beyond these walls into the greater Marin community. I feel the sparks of this goodness in my daily life. You give often and willingly. I hope these acts of hesed and tzedakah fill your lives with meaning and that you enjoy this for many, many years.

This is the time of year in which we are more aware than ever of the tightrope we walk in life. We balance between taking care of ourselves and taking care of others. We debate between self-advancement and altruism, between focusing on self and looking outward into the world. We teeter between worldly success and inner fulfillment, between our peace-loving inclinations and the drive to build and create in the world.

Of course some of us are tired and find it difficult to walk that tightrope. Many of us have moved into an age where the main goal is “learning to say no.” We are overloaded, overscheduled, overcommitted and overwhelmed. We take seminars on learning to say no. We buy books. Amazon has 20,000 on “how to say no;” “how to say yes?” - only 4,000.

There’s so much that gets in the way of saying yes. Will I jeopardize my own success if I am such a giver? Won’t I get lost in the shuffle if I look out for others? If I say yes too often, won’t I risk too much? What will happen with my career?

And then there's compassion fatigue: a daughter taking care of her mother, a friend taking meals to a homebound senior, a man writing a check for yet another needy cause. We are warned to take care of ourselves. After all, we have limited strength, resources. How in the world do we keep on giving more?

For those who are concerned about jeopardizing their own success, consider this. You might think that givers come out at the bottom, according to any material measure. But in a book that recently came out called Give and Take, author Adam Grant shows that givers are actually successful and productive people, even in their own careers. It turns out that giving is accompanied by great success.

And as far as the so-called compassion fatigue, Grant overturns that too. He finds that those who feel good about what they do, who see value in their efforts, don't really feel this compassion fatigue. They are tired but gratified. And in fact, they give even more.

When we are helping someone else, often, we lose track of time. The meaning of what is happening in that moment is more important than anything: comforting a friend who suffered a loss, helping a child prepare for a big project, offering kindness to an elderly

person, helping a colleague even when you're under a deadline yourself. These are hesed moments. They're important. Remember them.

In our world, there is so much need for hesed. We often feel powerless to affect what is going on: ISIS emerging as an horrendous phenomenon, an Ebola epidemic of biblical proportions, the continued threats to Israel, so much strife here in our own country. What can we do about all of this? And you might say to me, Rabbi, in light of the magnitude of problems we face in the world, you're going to talk about these small acts of kindness?

Yes, my answer is yes. This is what we can affect within our own reach. We must engage in hesed because we can. We may be tired, but we must keep giving. Simple moments matter.

Maimonides describes these simple moments. One of the great intellects of his age, he understood that when you perform acts of hesed, you fulfill the Torah commandment: "love your neighbor as yourself." (Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Avel 14:1). You see, self-love is actualized when we focus on others.

There is an old Hasidic story about a homeless woman like many others around her who was very, very cold. But she owned a big luxurious coat. Yet just before putting on the coat, she looked around and realized that others were cold too, but they had nothing to

wear. So, instead of putting on the coat, she lit a huge fire to keep warm so that others could keep warm too. When we act in covenant with others, we connect with real people and we live out hesed.

There is something small yet so profound: a way to exercise what many call our “kindness muscles.” It is called the five-minute favor. In this New Year, vow to do five five-minute favors a week for someone you know. Start the spark of reciprocity by offering to help others: E-introduce someone who is looking for a job to someone who might know about a job. Offer to help a neighbor carry those full shopping bags. Just sit and actually listen to someone for five minutes and I mean really listen. Drop off some grocery gift cards to someone who is having trouble making their monthly bills.

The five-minute favor expands beautifully into our sacred community here. Feed the hungry, volunteer in our office, help us establish a homeless shelter, make a minyan for those to say kaddish, make a gift that is meaningful for you to our Annual Campaign.

This reminds me of a story about a rabbi who gets a call from the IRS.

Are you Rabbi Stein?

Yes, I am.

Can you help us?

I'll try.

Do you know a Sam Cohen?

Yes, I do.

Is he a member of your shul?

Yes he is.

Did he donate \$10,000 to the annual fund?

He will now.

Now that's a five-minute favor!

In the Ashrei prayer, which we say three times a day, we say, "You open your hand, your favor sustains the living. We say these words, we literally open up our hands to remind us to walk through the world with openness. Not clenching, but releasing to offer hesed, tzedakah and justice. And on this Yom Kippur, we pray for God to use the same just measures in judging us and sealing us in the Book of Life. Dear God, see our simple acts of hesed, embrace us for life and for good.

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