

ROSH HA-SHANAH MORNING 5778
SEPTEMBER 21, 2017

**WHAT I LEARNED FROM A LUCKY RABBIT'S
FOOT ON LONG BEACH ISLAND**

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At the northern tip of Long Beach Island, New Jersey, a stone's throw from Barnegat Lighthouse, that stately red and white tower whose nocturnal beacon glances back and forth unceasingly from ocean to bay, stands a squat little souvenir shop called Andy's At The Light.

For the last 72 years, Andy's has been the place to buy what they call "novelties" (and we call *tchotchkes*). Painted starfish, kitschy signs for your beach house, wiffle ball sets: you get the idea.

When I was a kid, no trip to the beach was complete without a stop at Barnegat Light for soft serve and *schmying* around Andy's. In the summer of 1981, when I was seven,

Andy's was *the* place to go for the *tchotchke par excellence* of the day: A Pet Rock. Remember those?

But what *I* wanted most was a Lucky Rabbit's Foot, which they had, in every color of the rainbow.

You might ask: Why did I want a lucky rabbit's foot? The answer is that my best friend Brian Katz had a lucky rabbit's foot.

So I strode into Andy's, clutching my allowance, and told my dad what I planned to buy.

What happened next turned out to be one of the formative Jewish lessons of my life.

He said: "It's your allowance and you can buy what you want. But it seems to me that a lucky rabbit's foot is *not very Jewish.*"

Well that was enough to stop me in my tracks and re-invest my allowance in some other *tchotchke*, I don't remember what.

Later, over ice cream, I asked, "So what's 'not Jewish' about a lucky rabbit's foot?"

Before I tell you his answer, you might find it interesting to learn that the superstition about rabbits' feet goes back as much as 2,600 years to ancient Celtic folklore, and that the North American version originates from African-American folklore known as hoodoo. It's said that carrying a rabbit's foot was thought to help with fertility, an inference drawn from their reproductive habits.

There are, however, several technical specifications the rabbit's foot must meet in order to be considered lucky. (1) It has to be the left hind foot. (2) The rabbit needs to have been captured and killed in a cemetery. (3) The rabbit's foot needs to be cut off on a specific day—usually a Friday, but with variations such as the weather, date, etc.

So it may surprise you that my dad's answer had *nothing to do* with a perceived incompatibility between Judaism and any of the following: non-kosher rodent-like animals, Celtic superstition, pagan fertility rituals, hoodoo, hanging out in cemeteries, and animal dismemberment on Fridays—any *one*

of which might have prompted a reasonable person to say, “it seems to me that a lucky rabbit’s foot is not very Jewish.”

“You see,” my dad explained, “they trap and kill rabbits for the express purpose of cutting off their feet, dipping them in dye, and then selling them for money. It’s cruel.”

It was at that moment, I recall, that I lost my appetite for ice cream.

It was also at that moment that I learned something profound about Judaism.

Actually, *three* important lessons emerge from this story.

First, for the parents in the room, that you never know which of your words are really going to sink in.

Second, that the beating heart of the Jewish tradition—and this sermon—is compassion for the needs and feelings of others.

Third, that it’s strange talking about your father when he’s right here in the room with you.

Speaking of which, *Avinu Malkeinu*.

All day long, *Avinu Malkeinu*. “Our Father, our King, hear our voice.”

Avinu Malkeinu, Choneinu va-aneinu, ki ein banu ma'asim: —literally, “be gracious to us and answer us, because we have no deeds in us.”

Aseh imanu tzedakah va-Hesed, v'hoshieinu: Literally, “be charitable and compassionate with us, and save us.”

In other words: “O God: We lack the deeds to show for ourselves, so turn us into instruments of Your compassion, by which we save ourselves.”

I can think of no timelier message.

We are suffering from a Compassion Deficiency Syndrome of epidemic proportions. As a new year begins, I want to argue for the restoration of compassion—*Hesed* in Hebrew—to its rightful place at the heart of the Jewish tradition.

It is this essence of our religion that my dad (perhaps unwittingly) captured when he said that a Lucky Rabbit's Foot “isn't very Jewish.”

My parents did go about raising my sister and me deliberately to be Jews. I know they cared about us growing up to observe Shabbat with Friday night dinner and candles and wine and challah, the way we did every week. As regular service-goers, board members and temple volunteers, they hoped to model participation in the life of the synagogue, and it was fully expected that in addition to Sunday school and twice-a-week afternoon Hebrew school, we would also attend Friday night services and the holidays, experience Jewish summer camp, and maybe even show up for Torah study on Saturday mornings.

After their first trip to Israel when I was a teenager, Zionism became a prominent thread in the tapestry of our family's Judaism. I know my parents hoped we would create Jewish homes of our own, and would not waver in standing up against anti-Semitism.

But, when I think about my Jewish upbringing, these themes take a back seat to the *Hesed* they modeled for us as the dominant thrust of Judaism.

In fact, one of the last things my parents asked me to do before going off to college was to write a check to Federation around the High Holidays. “It doesn’t have to be a huge sum. But it’s a good habit to start getting into on your own,” they said.

Good habits like these go by many names but they all mean the same thing. We call them *Ma’asim Tovim*, good deeds, or *Gemilut Chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness, or, in the language of the *Avinu Malkeinu*, “*Tzedakah Va-Hesed*,” charity and compassion.

Are we in the habit of *Hesed*?

The American author Henry James gave this advice to his nephew: “Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind.”

We seem to have missed the memo. Public discourse has become coarse and cruel. Schoolyard taunts have infected grownups’ speech. Social media is contaminated with lies and libels issued with callous casualness.

And this is to say nothing of the amplification of hate speech and violent intimidation in recent weeks, about which I will say more on Yom Kippur.

Our collective failure of *Hesed* has created a culture of infighting that undermines Jewish solidarity.

In Israel, hardline Orthodox politicians routinely smear Reform Jews as enemies of the state. Two weeks ago the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem called us “worse than Holocaust deniers.” In American Jewish life, Jews are divided by politics and inane litmus tests of their loyalty to Israel.

It used to be the case that when a congregant felt offended, hurt, or even just mildly ticked off at something the rabbi said or did, or failed to do, the aggrieved party would approach the rabbi, perhaps meet privately, and air the grievance. Maybe it would lead to a rapprochement. Maybe not. Sometimes the congregant would resign.

Nowadays rabbis worry that if they run afoul of a congregant’s opinions, feelings, politics or points-of-view,

they will be subjected to a campaign of public humiliation and professional sabotage.

Such was the case last September in Austin, Texas, where Conservative rabbi Neil Blumofe became the center of an uproar in his community by having the audacity to suggest in a planning meeting for a joint Jewish-Christian trip to Israel that the travel itinerary might include a visit to Ramallah in the West Bank, the site of Yassir Arafat's grave, in the spirit of interreligious cooperation... an idea subject, the rabbi insisted, to the interests and input of the travelers.

For this, Blumofe was excoriated in a letter sent to area philanthropists demanding that they withhold all funding of the JCC where Blumofe's congregation is housed. He was accused of ties to organizations of which he is not a member, all with the aim of removing him from his pulpit.

Let me be perfectly clear: I do not endorse taking Jewish groups to Yassir Arafat's grave. But I do condemn the way in which our colleague was treated for the mere suggestion.

This story illuminates so many of the symptoms of Compassion Deficiency Syndrome: The disregard of facts, the disproportionate response, the rush to judgment without proper understanding of context, the public airing of personal grievances, the entitlement we feel to vent our rage with impunity, the lack of compunction about lynching another person's character.

And it's everywhere, this malaise of meanness: doctors, therapists, teachers, and business owners now fear that a single savage online review from a disgruntled patient, student, or customer could destroy a career and a reputation built over decades.

Judaism demands better of us.

Toward the end of his life, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "When I was young, I admired clever people. Now that I am old, I admire kind people."

Heschel would have admired Pope Francis. In April the Pope traveled to a penitentiary which houses men and women who testified as witnesses for the state against

associates or accomplices. There, the Pope bent down and washed the feet of twelve prisoners in a gesture of service toward marginalized people.

Can you imagine such a practice in Judaism?

I hope you can, because the Pope borrowed it from an influential Galilean Jew who put compassion toward the meek, the poor, and the outcast at the center of his rabbinate. And Jesus doubtless learned it from the Torah and the Prophets.

Now Judaism is emphatic about many things, including the pursuit of justice, our responsibility to the Jewish people, the importance of education.

But without *Hesed* at the center, without compassion, without the ability to understand and respond to the needs and feelings of others as our essential message and mandate, our entire religious enterprise collapses. We become rote practitioners of empty ritual, passionate Zionists without *menschlichkeit*, learners of Torah with no Torah deeds.

In fact, the Rabbis placed compassion as the foundation-stone for all existence: “The world stands upon three things,” they write. “Upon Torah, service to God, and acts of compassion” (*Avot* 1:2).

These things go hand-in-hand. Compassion toward others is how we live the words of Torah and serve our God.

In the mind of the Rabbis, the model of *Hesed* is God personified and God’s own compassion is the *alpha* and *omega* of Judaism. The Torah begins and ends with *Hesed*. God hand-stitches clothing for Adam and Eve. In response the Talmud teaches, “Just as God dresses the naked, so should you dress the naked.”

A few chapters later, Abraham circumcises himself and his household. God pays him a house call. In response the Talmud teaches, “Just as God visits the sick, so should you visit the sick.”

At the end of the Torah, when Moses dies, God’s own hand lays him to rest. In response the Talmud teaches: “Just as God buried the dead, so should you bury the dead.”¹

¹ Paraphrased from Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 14a.

All these basic kindnesses—clothing the naked, visiting the sick, providing a proper burial for the dead, consoling the bereaved, feeding the hungry, redeeming the captive, assisting the refugee, aiding the poor and the stranger, ministering to the vulnerable—come back to God.

For the Jew, Godliness is attained not through extraordinary accomplishments but through ordinary deeds of compassion, performed with extraordinary fidelity.

A little over 50 years ago, an MIT professor and meteorologist named Edward Norton Lorenz began to develop what became *chaos theory*, one of the most important scientific developments of the 20th century. He discovered that minute differences in a dynamic system such as the atmosphere could trigger vast and often unsuspected results.

In 1972, these observations led him to formulate what became known as the “Butterfly Effect”—a term that grew out of an academic paper whose title asks, “Does the Flap of a Butterfly’s Wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas?”—a premise that seems eerily prescient this year of all years.

Since then, the “Butterfly Effect” has become a metaphor for any system in which small actions set off a chain reaction leading to monumental results. A small commitment to everyday *Hesed* could produce a Butterfly Effect: a revolution of kindness that would change the world.

So walk slowly behind or beside pedestrians who are elderly or disabled instead of passing them on the sidewalk. Dial back the road rage. Ignite less, ignore more. Think twice before hitting “send.” No matter how wronged we may feel in a disagreement, before giving a spouse the cold shoulder, or chewing out your kids, or reprimanding a coworker, pause to ask: “Is my response apt to do more harm than good?” Remember that animals have feelings too. Remember that we people may have stewardship over the planet but that does not give us license to use and abuse at will. Don’t indulge gossip. Reach out when someone in your community is sick or hurting. Remember your loved ones’ birthdays and anniversaries. Call them often and try to work

through whatever might be preventing you from ending conversations with “I love you.”

Every day at WRT I stand in awe of the *Hesed* happening here without fanfare or acclaim: the volunteers who participate in Cooking for Hope, as they will this coming Monday morning; who show up to feed Thanksgiving Dinner to the visually impaired, throw a Chanukah party for guests with developmental challenges, and another one a few weeks later for Holocaust survivors. The congregants who write condolence notes and make *shiva* calls and bring meals after a hospital stay. The students whose *B'nei Mitzvah* projects take them to Mount Vernon and White Plains for after-school tutoring, who are teaching sports to kids who, because of their disabilities, have never been invited to put on a uniform or throw a ball. The way in which you've responded to our Zero Waste initiative, by recycling and composting here and participating in Scarsdale's new food scraps program. The 175 of our congregants who have trained for months to welcome

and furnish for the needs of a family escaping the war-torn Middle East.

The *Hesed* in this congregation alone could generate a Butterfly Effect far beyond our walls.

Coda

The famous Rabbi Marshak is not a real rabbi.

He exists only in the mind of the Coen Brothers, and he appears only in their movie, *A Serious Man*, set in the Jewish suburbs of Minneapolis in the 1960s.

In his massive study the ancient, long-bearded Marshak sits in silent contemplation, barricaded from the world by his fearsome and imposing secretary, who denies entry to anyone who comes seeking an appointment.

“The Rabbi is busy,” she intones.

“He doesn’t look busy!”

“He’s thinking,” she deadpans.

Danny, the bar mitzvah boy, though, does finally get to see Marshak who proceeds to return the confiscated transistor radio that Danny had brought as contraband to Hebrew school a few weeks earlier.

The old man leans in close. This is the moment we've all been waiting for, when the sage will dispense the purest distillation of the wisdom of all his accumulated years.

Marshak's voice is no more than a whisper. He says:
"Be a good boy."

And really, is there anything more Jewish than that?

Shanah tovah.