

Yom Kippur Morning 5770 -- Temple Beth Abraham
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Enlarging our Circle of *Chesed*

Each year on Yom Kippur, wherever I have been, I choose to speak in the morning right after the Haftarah. It's not easy to follow Isaiah. Whose words are worthy to follow the prophet's stirring challenge to us, to make our fast meaningful by dedicating ourselves to justice and compassion? Yet we cannot pass by the duty to translate his words for ourselves. Even at the risk of not being equal to Isaiah's eloquence and poetry.

Most years I talk in that spirit about hunger, poverty, the injustices in the larger world that Isaiah spoke about, and our role as a Jewish community in the wider world. This year I want to focus my words inward -- on the character of our own congregation, as a community of caring and compassion; and on ourselves individually. I trust that from the initiatives you have seen and will see soon, you will know that continues to be part of my message.

Oranges, or challah.

Oranges, or challah. This is the story of the first Jewish debate -- a discussion about bread baking and an orange grove, about Sarah and Avraham. Our founders. The ones whose names honor this synagogue -- Beth Abraham, the house of Avraham and Sarah.

They carried on a running debate about challah and oranges for sixty-two years. Here's a glimpse, from about year fourteen:

Sarah says: Did you see what I did today? I've figured out how people will know who we are and what we're all about. Those baguettes I've been baking -- well, this morning, I put three of them together, wove the dough over and under, and I added some honey before I baked it. I took it some of it out to the people watching our herds, and to those Emorites and Hittites nearby. They're eating it now, look. Do you see the look on their faces? Emorites love challah, Avraham. The Hittites liked it -- they suggested I try adding raisins.

Avraham sighs. Sarah-le, he says. We've been over this. You bring out bread, and they say thank you, and they asked who made the challah. And you'll say?

I made it, says Sarah. I made it, for you.

Exactly, says Avraham. But this is supposed to be bigger than you and me. We're nomads. Last year we were in Beit-El, this year it's Chevron, who knows about next year. If we're not here, if the challah disappears, they'll feel abandoned, not just by us but by the Blessed Holy One. Besides, braiding bread, don't you think that's not the most productive use of time?

When I bring them challah, I feel godly -- says Sarah, softly. I think they can see it. It's not something I have to explain to them. Weaving the dough I do for me. It reminds me that we're all intertwined. Isn't that what One God means?

*I did something new today, says Avraham. You know how I've been bringing fruit over to the Philistines? Today it hit me -- I should just *plant* them an orange grove.*

Sarah says: Isn't that a bit impersonal?

I'll do it over there, by the oasis. Once we plant them, they'll always be there. I don't have to bring them over to their tents, get in their face. Maybe they'll prefer to pick them themselves. If we leave, or if we have to go away just for a couple weeks to pasture the herds, it'll be there. They'll remember -- that we were here, that we cared. That we still care, even if we can't see them anymore. And if they do come over and say thank you, I'll say: Don't thank me. There's water everywhere, nutrients and sun -- the Blessed Holy One takes care of us every day. I'm just the gofer, the clerk, that's all.

Now Sarah sighs. Oh Avraham, she says. You and your abstractions.

That's what it was like for sixty-two years. Back and forth about challah and oranges. The oranges got juicier, the challah got attached to Shabbat and holidays; they took care of that in about year fifty. But they never stopped working on it. Who were Avraham and Sarah, our founders? They were inventors. The inventors of *chesed* -- of kindness, of generosity, of reaching out. They never stopped asking each other, what's the right way. Warm challah, delivered personally; public works, solid and enduring. That's who they were, and that's why the Blessed Holy One chose them in the first place.

They left Ur, the great ancient city; they left alone and walked. They knew their own sadness, of separation, being apart from their families. They believed that each day was like a tallit that the Blessed Holy One wrapped around them, they felt that God steadied their feet, gave sun and water and nourishment for them and their small flocks. They knew the first commandment before God even had to tell them: Be like me. Reach out, look for ways to care for the varied people you will meet on your journey.

When they stopped for a while in Haran, along the road in Syria, Avraham and Sarah would go into the marketplace and pray. This how they prayed: They stood facing each other. They looked up, then at each other. Then they each turned around in place, slowly to the right, and looked in all directions. They paid attention to everyone they could see. When they completed a circle, they would close their eyes, and look up again. It took about thirty seconds.

It was remarkable the visions they would have in those thirty seconds. Invariably, they could see a furrowed brow even a mile away, or hear a silent cry. Sarah would go off and bake, and bring the bread to someone she had noticed somewhere in the 360. Avraham would leave a basket of fruit, the same way.

People started joining them -- not just people who had been touched by their kindness, but people who watched them in the daily, circling prayer. There were those who were enthralled by the arguments, the great challah-orange debate, which could be easily heard

over meals in their tent, which they kept open at all times. By the time Avraham and Sarah picked up for Canaan, they were a community of hundreds. A growing circle of *chesed*, of generosity and devotion, of need and response.

That's where *we* come from. From Sarah and Avraham, who reached out of their own loneliness and became lifelong innovators in the field of compassion. The Talmud says that because of our founders, the Jewish people are known as *Rachmanim B'nai Rachmanim*, compassionate people descended from compassionate ancestors. An ever-enlarging circle of care. Of love -- that's the religious word. That's who we're supposed to be, that's what Temple Beth Abraham means.

How do we cultivate that mindset, or better yet, that setting for our souls? Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, a great spiritual guide of the past century, teaches that all people have a measure of it. We typically have a circle of family and friends that we care about, whose needs we are more or less attuned to. Then there's everyone else, who we don't know or who we encounter only casually, as at work or even here in the synagogue, in the community. Those people we don't see, those needs we don't perceive. We're usually motivated to care and reach out to people we feel a connection with. That's part of what being connected is. Community service, to the people who already feel like a part of your community.

But Rabbi Dessler teaches that there is another level. He writes: "Let a person deeply understand, at his core, that the one he gives to, he will then love. If someone seems strange or unfamiliar to you, it is just because you have not yet given to him in some way."

Rabbi Dessler says that to be a religious person means dividing the world into two groups: *Those we love and those we have just not gotten around to loving yet*. Those we have given to, and those we haven't taken the opportunity to give to yet.

To enlarge our circle of care requires us only to be on the lookout for an opportunity to do the next kind act. To reach out to another person enlarges our souls, increases the amount of love in our lives. What's the limit on how large a true community can be? We are limited only by our actions.

Just look at us, this community of nomads who have settled here from so many places, or who are dropping in or passing through today. I saw a remarkable thing happen here last year among the families who celebrated bnot and bnai mitzvah. Of the ten families in last year's seventh grade cohort, few lived anywhere near each other -- they lived in Bedford, Derry, Litchfield, Hudson, Nashua, Hollis, and Merrimack. About as far as our membership reaches. Just baking for an oneg or a kiddush can be a daunting project, and what happened is remarkable, as for weeks in May and June and August and now again in September and October, people came in for each other and helped each other prepare. Busy schedules were adjusted and worked around, distances were negotiated. Helping someone celebrate a *simcha* is most assuredly a kind of *chesed*. From those acts of giving and helping, a circle of concern and mutual support became larger.

Our congregation will be a community -- a community worthy of the name on our outer walls -- when our circle of concern encompasses all of us. When each of us feels that at a

time of need, we can turn here. When each of us is looking for a next way to be responsive.

A community of *chesed* by definition also a community of need. Asking for support is hard. Partly because it can be embarrassing. Partly out of fear that people won't in fact come through. Partly it's this New Hampshire, Yankee stoicism. But it's all right to need. If there is anything the High Holidays reminds us, it is that we are all in need. Look at us here already, gathered here in mutual support. Each of us here with our prayers for a new year, with hopes and uncertainties. Each of us with flaws to confess, hoping for a chance to be believed and trusted. Just being here for each other as we confront our flaws is a tremendous kindness we do for one another. We are not divided into people who need and people who don't. People who live close by, people who live farther. We all need, and it's all right to need.

There are things we do in this community already, that we need to do even more.

Nobody knows what to say at a house of shiva, especially when it's someone you don't know. But when the announcement comes that there is a shiva at a home in our community, know that your presence means more than the right words. It brings the comforting presence of one more soul to a home where there is a void of soul, where a soul is suddenly, achingly missing, where even the presence of ten cannot fill the void. This you bring even if you don't know the fellow congregant, if you can't put a face to the name. If your commute or the transporting of kids doesn't make it impossible, bring your soul to a house of shiva. Time and again, people tell me, as they tell all rabbis -- the true measure of a community is how it responds at a time of loss.

Some of our *mischeberach* list are people living here, who need a meal or many, or a ride to the store or the doctor. Who would be cheered by a friendly visit or even a supportive phone call. Cars and freezers are wonderful tools of *chesed*. If you have a time of day that you can typically drive, let us know. If you've got a day when you're cooking and can make a little extra to freeze or have brought to someone, give a heads up. We're being told that a lot of people might be sick this fall; the need for chicken soup may be at an all-time high! Or if you're willing to be on call, to prepare a meal for someone who is sick or for a shiva home, please volunteer. Our list, I can say, is growing. Sandee Goldberg chairs our Social Action Committee, which should really be called our *Chesed* Committee. That's a large part of what it does -- volunteer to her! Laura Horowitz, and Elaine Brody when Laura's not available, make sure we have food for a house of shiva.

Our evening minyan is many things, including an opportunity for twenty minutes of peace and reflection on a weeknight or a Sunday morning. It is also, daily, a *chesed* we do for those in mourning or commemorating a *yahrzeit*. Once in a while, if it is not your habit, come for yourself and for those who are mourning. See that weekly announcement, and the MinyanMaker button on the synagogue website, as an opportunity to do a *chesed*.

There are so many ways to respond. We have lost many jobs and incomes during this terrible recession, and have tried to help people get through, or network, or find resources. If there are ideas for how to do that better, we need to hear. If there are needs,

a person can always come to me for a confidential conversation, and I can help find resources from in our community or beyond.

This year is Temple Beth Abraham's last turn hosting CROP Walk, the Nashua Area Interfaith Council's gathering and fundraiser to stamp out hunger in the local community and worldwide. It has been an honor, and a feather in our cap, and a way to do justice to the name of our congregation. We need to be there in numbers that fit our name. Last year, at about 45 walkers, we were about the third largest group. Let's double that to one hundred. You don't have to be able to walk, or to walk far -- come and help. Come and let us be strengthened in our commitment to compassion and justice, as we open our tent just as did our ancestors.

These are just some ways to enlarge the circle of *chesed* in the coming year through our synagogue, and there are more you know about or can read about through the bulletin or the Web. Last year I offered to give \$250 in matching funds to any group interested in starting a tzedakah collective. That led to the creation of the Jewish Mothers Giving Circle, which learned a great deal about Judaism and our communities, amassed several hundred dollars, and is still going. I renew that offer again.

Sarah and Avraham argued for sixty-two years about challah and oranges, and they never did persuade each other. Sure, sometimes Avraham measured the flour, and sometimes Sarah picked oranges that dropped to the ground. Don't get hung up on the gender stereotypes; we could rewrite the story and flip the two characters. Today we talk about different learning styles, and in the same vein there are *chesed* styles. Some of us give through our personal interactions, more like the story of Sarah. Some orchestrate or organize, perhaps more like Avraham. Find your way, to match what you do well or like to do with what others may need.

Most of all, be like our ancestors, each day on the lookout for an opportunity to give and to make this a community of *chesed*. Be a *chesed* innovator, in your own lives. Live the name of this synagogue. As often as you can, pray the circular prayer. Look around, slowly, in each direction, be attuned for someone to see, whose need you can understand.

There are only two groups of people in your world: Those you give to, and those you have not yet given to. Those you love, and those you have simply not yet loved.