

Doing Good

48 Brief Torah Insights/דברי תורה
About Acts of Caring
Based on Jewish Texts and Their Commentaries

Danny Siegel



For over 40 years, I have been a student of Danny Siegel's teachings and writings. He brings his incredible poetry and prose to promote interpersonal mitzvot, the giving of tzedaka, and an approach to human kindness based in Torah teachings and on living personalities who exemplify these actions. Welcome to another anthology of Danny's Torah...you will actually hear his voice teaching as you read this work.

Rabbi Arnold Samlan
Chief Jewish Education Officer
Broward County, FL, Federation

Danny sees the light of Torah and rays of Jewish values shining through in situations that might strike others as ordinary and mundane. He captures this light and shares it beautifully in his divrei Torah, demonstrating that Judaism is not only what we do in our synagogues or in our homes, but that Judaism can and should be lived in all moments of our lives, wherever we may find ourselves.

Mitchell Berkowitz, Associate Rabbi
B'nai Israel Congregation, Rockville, Maryland

Danny Siegel, our favorite teacher of Mitzvot and friend to great Mitzvah Heroes has once again graced us with wonderful words and deeds of Torah to deepen our understanding, to inspire us, and especially *to encourage us do something good for someone else* — and for ourselves! He leads us, Talmudic-like, onto a personal journey of contemporary understanding and practical action. Whatever good you were doing before you read his most recent two volume collection *Doing Good* and *Jewish VIP's—Values, Ideals, and Principles*, you will do even more following studying these texts. He gently probes our inner conscience to do the right things — always.

Even greater than the classic command to “Learn Torah,” Danny evokes in us the Hassidic exhortation to “Be Torah”. Learning texts by themselves is not enough; one needs to exemplify Jewish values in all that one does. His two latest books are wonderful guides in that process.

Rabbi Jonathan Porath

Doing Good combines Danny Siegel's profound and extensive knowledge of ancient Jewish texts on giving, with his passion for finding and supporting the people who best exemplify those texts. The result is a book that shows us how to do good and in doing so bring meaning and purpose to our lives. Timely and timeless, this book calls to us to change the world for better and points to the myriad of ways in which we can relieve suffering when we learn how to ‘think *Mitzvahs*’.

Anne Andrew PhD,
former Principal Temple Sholom Religious School, Vancouver, BC,
author of *What They Don't Teach in Prenatal Class:
The Key to Raising Trouble-Free Kids and Teens*

Doing Good

Danny Siegel

48 Brief Torah Insights/דברי תורה
About The Jewish View Of
מצוות בין אדם וחברו - *Mitzvahs Bayn Adam leChavayro* —
Acts Of Caring That Bring Benefit to Other People
Based on Biblical, Talmudic, Midrashic, and Halachic Texts
And Their Ancient, Medieval, and Modern Commentaries

וַעֲשֵׂה טוֹב - Do good
(Psalm 34:15)

בִּישׁוּרֵי טוֹב - Be On The Lookout For Doing Good
(Amos 5:14)

דְּרֹשׁוּ טוֹב - Devote Yourself To Doing Good
(Amos 5:14)

לִמְדוּ הַיָּטִב - Learn Well To Do Good
(Isaiah 1:17)

וְאַהֲבֵהוּ טוֹב - Love Good
(Amos 5:15)

The Good People

The Good People everywhere
will teach anyone who wants to know
how to fix all things breaking and broken in this world —
including hearts and dreams —
and along the way we will learn such things as
why we are here
and what we are supposed to be doing
with our hands and minds and souls and our time.
That way, we can hope to find out why
we were given a human heart,
and that way, we can hope to know
the hearts of other human beings
and the heart of the world.

Cover Photo: The Rabbanit Bracha Kapach, well-known classic Jerusalem תַּדֶּקֶת/*Tzadeket*-Righteous Woman, standing in front of *some* of the boxes of Matzahs for her annual Passover food distribution. She did this Mitzvah for nearly 50 years. At its height, over 6,300 families and individuals received a variety of essentials to allow them to enjoy the holiday. I knew The Rabbanit personally for 38 years. Dvar Torah #34. *(Photo by Chagit Tsachi)*

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Any adaptations and changes are completely my own.

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However, you will need to contact me for permission if you are using any of the poems.

My thanks to my Cousin Ben Zuhl and Rabbi Mark Hyman for their help with the photographs.

All photographs are used with permission.

Books by Danny Siegel:

Doing Good (PDF, 2023)
Jewish VIPs - Values Ideals and Principles (PDF, 2023)
Radiance - Creative Mitzvah Living, The Selected Prose and Poetry
of Danny Siegel (The Jewish Publication Society, 2020)
From the Heart – Love Poems (2012)
Who - Me? Yes-You!, A workbook to Help You Decide Where, When, Why
and How You Can Do Your Best Tikkun Olam (2006)
Giving Your Money Away - Danny Siegel's Practical Guide
to Personalized Tzedakah (2006)
Danny Siegel's Bar and Bat Mitzvah Mitzvah Book
Mitzvah Magic with Naomi Eisenberger (Children's Stories, Kar-ben, Inc., 2002)
1 + 1 = 3 and 37 Other Mitzvah Principles For a Meaningful Life (2000)
Healing: Readings and Meditations (1999)
Heroes and Miracle Workers (1997)
Good People (1995)
The Humongous Pushka in the Sky (Children's Story, 1993)
After the Rain (Children's Story for Adults), (1993)
Tell Me a Mitzvah (Children's stories, Kar-Ben Copies, Inc., 1993)
A Hearing Heart (poetry, 1992)
The Meadow Beyond the Meadow (poetry, 1991)
Mitzvahs, (1990)
Family Reunion: Making Peace in the Jewish Community, (1989)
Munbaz II and Other Mitzvah Heroes, (1988)
Gym Shoes and Irises: Personalized Tzedakah, (1981)
Book Two, (1987)
Angels (essays), (1980)
Where Heaven and Earth Touch: An Anthology of Midrash and Halachah
Book One, (1983);
Large Print Edition, (1985),
Book Two, (1984),
Book Three, (1985),
Combined Books One-Three, (1988),
Hardback edition, (1989); Soft cover, (1995) (Jason Aronson publishers),
Source Book: Selected Hebrew and Aramaic Sources, (1985)
The Unorthodox Book of Jewish Records and Lists
(humor, co-authored with Allan Gould), (1982)
The Lord Is a Whisper at Midnight: Psalms and Prayers, (1985)
The Garden, Where Wolves and Lions Do No Harm to the Sheep and Deer
(poetry), (1985)
Unlocked Doors: The Selected Poems of Danny Siegel 1969-1983, (1983)
Before Our Very Eyes: Readings for a Journey Through Israel, (1986)
Nine Entered Paradise Alive (poetry), (1980)
Between Dust and Dance (poetry and prose), (1978)
And God Braided Eve's Hair (poetry), (1976)
Soulstoned (poetry), (1969)

*This Anthology is dedicated to
Rabbi Jonathan Porath
Friend For More Than Six Decades*

***I owe a special debt of gratitude to Arnold Draiman
who suggested and arranged a blog for me
in the Israeli online newspaper Times of Israel —
which is the origin of this anthology of Divray Torah.***

I would like to thank

Rabbi Jack Riemer, Rabbi Michael Klayman, Jan Zlotowicz, Dr. Michael Stulberg, Mark Stadler, Rabbi Irving Greenberg, Rabbi Daniel Sperber, Chana Sperber, Rabbi David Ellenson, Rabbi Bennett Miller, Rabbi Donald Rossoff, Naomi Eisenberger, Rabbi Moshe Edelman, Rabbi Ron Hoffberg, Professor Stephen Garfinkel, Rabbi Arthur Rulnick, Rabbi Jonathan Porath, The Gondos Family, Rabbi Jack Paskoff, Rabbi Shai Held, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, Professor Ron Wolfson, William Novak, Ari Bar-Oz, Rabbi Jan Kaufman, Rabbi James Michaels, Rabbis Bill and Jim Lebeau, Rabbi Joel Soffin, Rabbi Neal Gold, Rabbi Michael Safra, Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz, Rabbi Dan Moskovitz, Richard Moline, Michael Oren, Rabbi Arnold Samlan, Rabbi Jan Kaufman, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, Rabbi Paul Freedman, Jules Gutin, Rabbi Steven Glazer, Rabbi Gary Greene, Gary Ginsberg, Rabbi Martin Lockshin, Nina Targovnik, Rabbi Gary Charlestein, Rabbi Bernie Rotman, Professor Jeffrey Tigay, Trevor Ferrell, Rabbi Mark Greenspan, Arthur Kurzweil, Rabbi David Shneyer, Diane Jacobstein, Avshalom Beni, Anita Shkedi, Joy Rothenberg, Louise Cohen, Arnie Hammer, Mike Rosenman, Rabbi Marc Kline, Rabbi Corey Helfand, and Rabbi Irving Elson, and to the inspired and inspiring educators Merle Gould, Beth Huppin Anne Andrew, Janis Knight, and Sharon Morton.

***for the abundance of their Torah-insights
incorporated in many of my Divray Torah,
and consistently enthusiastic encouragement for this project.***

And to my niece Debbie Wilcox

***תודה רבה/Todah Rabbah
for helping prepare this manuscript electronically,***

**I also want to pay tribute to the memory of those individuals
whose teaching and guidance played
such an important role in my life:**

My parents, Dr. Julius and Edythe Silberblatt Siegel, Ethel French, Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, Myriam Mendilow, Hadassah Levi, Joel Dorkam, Alvin Schultzberg, Rabbi Noah Golinkin, Rachel Reinitz, Harold Schlaffer, Dr. Morton Siegel, Blanche “Tanta Bluma” Davidson, Abraham and Shulamit Gittelsohn, Sandy and Eleanor Orr, (Professors) Moshe Held, H.L. Ginsberg, Nahum Sarna, Yochanan Muffs, and Shalom Paul, Allan Gould, Mark Sternfeld, Rabbi Mordy Kieffer, Uncle Herb Kamm, and Rabbi Mark Loeb.

***זכרונם לברכה/Zichronam Livracha,
May their memory be for a blessing.***

Important Sources

The following should prepare you for reading the contents of this anthology:

Brief, Useful Quotes:

וַעֲשֵׂה טוֹב-Do good (Psalm 34:15)

1. An exceptionally powerful statement:

אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר כְּתִיב
כְּתִיב נֹתֵן לַחֵם לְכָל בֶּשֶׂר
בֹּא זֶה וְחֹטֵף לוֹ אֶת הַמִּצְוָה

Rabbi Elazar said,

The verse (Psalm 136:25) states, “[God] gives food to everyone.”
...and this Mitzvah-person got there before Me.

(Leviticus Rabba 34:2)

A multitude of sermons, articles, and books have dealt with the subject of human beings as God’s partners. In his very bold statement, Rabbi Lazar is saying that, for whatever reason, God has not finished the work of feeding human beings. So it is up to the Mitzvah-person who has to rush in and feed people (as it were, “beating God to the Mitzvah”).

The word “חֹטֵף” means “to snatch” or “to grab”.

2. To be is to do. Myriam Mendilow, ז״ל

Founder of Jerusalem’s יד לקשיש/Yad Lakashish-Life Line for the Old

3. To be is to stand for. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, ז״ל

4. To be Jewish is to be an idealist. Unknown Source

5.

שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּנוֹ אוֹמֵר...
וְלֹא הַמְדַרְשׁ הוּא הָעֵקֶר אֲלֵא הַמַּעֲשֵׂה

Shimon [the son of Rabban Gamliel] says:

It is not what one says, but rather what one does,
that makes all the difference in the world. (Pirkay Avot 1:17)

6.

בְּפִקּוּדֶיךָ אֶשְׁיַחֵה וְאַבְיָטָה אֶרְחֹתֶיךָ:

By talking about your Mitzvahs,

I see more clearly the way You would like things to be. (Psalm 119:15)

7. Only a life lived for others is a life worthwhile. Albert Einstein

8. There are people who take the heart out of you,
and there are people who put it back. Elizabeth David, British Food Writer

9.

כִּוְצְדָקָה לְחַיִּים

Tzedakah gives stability to life. (*Proverbs 11:19*)

10.

Here is the test to find whether your mission on earth is finished:

If you're alive, it isn't. *Richard Bach, Author of Jonathan Livingston Seagull*

11. **When I was young, I admired clever people.**

As I grew old, I came to admire kind people. *Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, ז"ל*

Rabbi Heschel was born in Europe. His first language was Yiddish. "Clever" in non-American English means "bright", "intelligent", "talented".

12. **Living is not a private affair of the individual.**

Living is what man does with God's time, what man does with God's world.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, ז"ל

13. **Tzedakah is not about giving;**

Tzedakah is about being. *Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson*

14. **The meaning of man's life lies in his perfecting the universe. He has to distinguish ...and redeem the sparks of holiness scattered throughout the darkness of the world.**

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, ז"ל

15. **Remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Know that every deed counts, that every word is power...Above all, remember that you must build your life as if it were a work of art.**

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, ז"ל

16. **We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.**

Winston Churchill

17. **There must be more to life than having everything.** *Maurice Sendak*

18. **The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And, the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference. Because of indifference one dies before one actually dies.** *Elie Wiesel, ז"ל*

19. **Most of the things worth doing in the world had been declared impossible before they were done.** *Justice Louis Brandeis*

20. **If you believe it's possible to damage, believe it's possible to restore.**

Rebbi Nachman of Bratzlav

21.

רב אמר לא נתנו מצוות אלא לצרף בהן את הביריות

Rav said: Mitzvahs were given in order to bind God's creations together.

(Leviticus Rabba 13:3)

22.

רב אמר לא נתנו מצוות אלא לצרף בהן את הביריות

Rav said: Mitzvahs were given in order to refine human beings.

(Leviticus Rabba 13:3 [Margoliot Edition])

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*Moshe Rabbeynu, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jonah, Amos,
and (at least) 10 others
received Their Messages Directly From God*

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**Edythe Silberblatt (my mother)
And a group of other reporters for the Asbury Park, NJ, Press
after interviewing Eleanor Roosevelt in the late 1930's
My mother is standing to the First Lady's immediate right.
Dvar Torah #32. Photo: Dorn Photo, Red Bank, NJ.**

Introduction #1

אֲוֹרְחֵינוּ רַחֵמָה, וְצִוּוֹתֵינוּ בְּסִימָא (Sukkah 52a) - *Though the journey through this anthology may be long, I hope it will be pleasant because we will be doing it together.*

(Aleph)-Four verses, five translations —

On the title page I have selected four Biblical verses that I believe explains the Jewish relationship to doing good:

בְּרִשׁוֹנוֹתָם-Be On The Lookout For Doing Good (*Amos 5:14*), (another possible translation): **לְמַדּוּ דְרִשׁוּנוֹתָם-Devote Yourselves To** Doing Good (*Amos 5:14*), **לְמַדּוּ לְהֵיטִיב-Learn Well To** Do Good, (*Isaiah 1:17*), **וְאַהֲבֵנוּ טוֹב-Love** Good (*Amos 5:15*), and, most of all, **וַעֲשֵׂה טוֹב-Do good** (*Psalms 34:15*).

Beyond these texts from the Bible, my Divray Torah incorporate our Jewish material from other Biblical verses, the Talmud, Midrash, Halachah, and the commentaries that have accumulated over more than two millennia.

(Bet)-Words and phrases I consider fundamental (Hebrew: עִיקָרִים/ikkarim) for understanding טוב as a vibrant, living aspect of being Jewish —

In no order, among them are:

You just never know, Just doing my job, “In the meantime”, In the image of God, כְּבוֹד/dignity, Mensch, Menschlich, Menschlichkeit, Mitzvahs-and-Menschlichkeit, צְדָקָה/Tzedakah and צְדֵק/Tzedek, צְדָקָה/Tzedakah and חֲסִידִים, personalized Tzedakah, True power is Mitzvah power, Mitzvah heroes, Mitzvah heroes — our best teachers, It takes so little to make some people happy, There’s no such thing as a small Mitzvah, The common > the sublime, Miracles, It wouldn’t hurt, If it isn’t there, it just isn’t there, The rest is history, and You can’t do it because you can’t do it.

(Gimel)-Some topics I explored —

Possible practical suggestions for expanding our awareness of opportunities to do good, how to use our personal time, efforts, and Tzedakah money wisely, ancient and modern Mitzvah heroes as role models, simple ways to accomplish sometimes-stunning quantities of benefits to other people, the transformative power of Mitzvah-action doing on both the recipient and the person doing the Mitzvah, and how Jewish texts can be actualized and possibly bring more meaning to our lives.

(Dalet)-What this anthology is not

This is not a theological/philosophical analysis and certainly not an exhaustive study of what it means to do good. Perhaps oversimplifying, I would say that my hope would be that it would *practically* produce a greater quantity of good in other people’s lives.

(Hay)-A person insight after the work was finished

Similar to many other authors, I wrote this introduction *after* I had completed the rest of this anthology. What struck me is that I am essentially “preaching to the choir”. I really can’t think of any relatives, friends, strangers I have casually met, or individuals on my lecture tours who aren’t goodhearted, generous, *Menschlich* people, who devote themselves to doing good for others.

And so, to all of you who are joining me in this venture - **לַחַיִּים-LeChaim!**

Introduction #2

A. Creating this anthology of דברי תורה/Divray Torah —

A1. Definitions and Terminology:

דבר תורה/Dvar Torah (plural: **דברי תורה/Divray Torah**), literally means “A word of Torah”.

Length: **דבר/davar-**“word” in “**דבר תורה/Dvar Torah**” means it should be a brief presentation, usually 5 minutes and no more than 10.

Content: **תורה** in “**דבר תורה/Dvar Torah**” means that it is based on or makes reference to some classical Jewish text such as a verse in the Bible, a quote from the Talmud, Midrash, Halachah, or one or more of the many ancient, Medieval, and modern commentaries.

When: A Dvar Torah is usually delivered at a meal, often at a **סעודה שלישית/seudah sheleesheet-the late afternoon Shabbat meal between מנחה/mincha and מעריב/ma'ariv**, after a banquet at a *simcha*, as a substitute for an opening prayer at some celebration, or, even, if the Rabbi feels that services have *shlepped* on too long, and the congregants are edgy and are eager for the **קידוש/kiddush**, she or he may substitute it for a 20-minute sermon. Occasionally, the rabbi asks a congregant to deliver it the Torah-message.

The purpose: To transmit a Life-message based on Jewish values such as honesty in business, doing the necessary research before distributing Tzedakah money, allowing the computer or cellphone a day of rest on Shabbat, or the ethics of e-mails and websites — all in a concise “rememberable” manner.

מצוות: Hebrew “Mitzvot”, Yiddish “Mitzvahs”. While the strict definition of the Hebrew term has two meanings: “commandment” and “doing good”, I use the term as it is pronounced in Yiddish — “Mitzvahs” — in its common usage of “doing good for others”.

Text: A Jewish library has two kinds of books on the shelves:

(1) “**Book**” **books**, i.e., of a general nature which might include the The Six-Day War, the writings of Nobel Laureates Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Elie Wiesel, a cookbook *How To Prepare A Shabbat Meal In Three Minutes*, travel guides to Jewish communities around the world, and *The Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

(2) **Books of texts**, which refers to material preserved and handed down over the generations, including Bible, Talmud, Midrashic, Halachic works, and their massive accumulated commentaries. This is some of the terminology you might encounter in these and related Jewish texts:

Tzedakah: using a portion of our money for the benefit of others.

Gemillut Chassadim/גמילות חסדים: physical actions for the benefit of others that involve our time and personal effort.

Kavod/כבוד: Dignity.

Talmudic Page numbers, e.g., Avodah Zara 18a/א:זרה עבודה:

“Avoda Zara” is a major section of the Talmud. “18” is the double-sided leaf of a page. “א” (“a”) is the front side of the leaf, and “ב” (“b”) is the back.

הלכה-Halachah: the legal material in a Talmudic, medieval, or modern texts.

מדרש-Midrash: the non-legal material in those texts.

חברה/chevra: any group of friends or people with whom we associate.

ז"ל abbreviation of **זכרונו/הם לברכה**—**May his/her/their memory be a blessing for us**

עדן **מנוחתו/ה** **menuchato, menuchata Eden**—**May his/her soul eternally rest peacefully in the Garden of Eden**

A2. The Origin and Process of Creating this Anthology

1. Growing up in Arlington, Virginia, my Rabbi was Noah Golinkin. Educated in European Yeshivahs, he was learned in Bible and Talmud, and, as important, fluent in modern Hebrew. My first trip to Israel was in 1959 with him and a group of other rabbis and educators. I remember how they were dazzled by his effortless skill in the language. Israel was only 11 years old, and it was rare for a Jew from the diaspora to be gain such fluency.

2. All my undergraduate courses at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) were taught in Hebrew. My focus was on Bible and Talmud, and it was there that I was given the tools to study the texts in the original Hebrew and Aramaic. I very quickly became *passionate* about studying Jewish texts.

3. My Hebrew has been reinforced by 60 trips to Israel, including a full year in 1973-74 and 44 consecutive summers as the Tzedakah/Mitzvah Resource Person for the United Synagogue Youth Israel Pilgrimage.

4. In 1981, I founded two non-profit organizations: **זיו/Ziv Tzedakah Fund** in the United States and **זיו/Ziv Tzedakah Foundation** in Canada. During their years of activity, hundreds of donors put at my disposal more than \$14,500,000 to distribute to small, independent Mitzvah-programs devoted to doing good for others with a minimum of overhead and bureaucracy. During those years, I met, and continued my quest to meet, support, and work with inspiring individuals who were totally devoted to making the lives of others better. I call them “Mitzvah heroes”. I have been blessed to know more than 100 of them. Meeting them and giving away that Tzedakah money allowed me to witness thousands of human interactions on innumerable occasions, and the extraordinary power **צדקה/Tzedakah** money and **חסדים/Gemillut Chassidim**-personal, physical acts of kindness. Having been a “road warrior” for more than 50 years, speaking in a few hundred Jewish communities in North America greatly supplemented and deepened my observations of others doing good.

5. The turning point happened when I sensed that there was one more step in the process, i.e., to link the two elements: Jewish texts and Life as lived by Jews and human beings. Sometimes, I looked around me at people and then turned to the texts for some insight; at other times, a text moved me, and I moved away from the words for situations where the words might apply. Either way, **the purpose is to discover ways to live a *Menschlich* life.**

Ultimately, I believe that my optimistic conclusions are not mere Pollyanna-ish naïve thoughts, but rather, I believe, very real and applicable to daily life.

6. The final step happened about 4-5 years ago when my friend in Israel, Arnie Draiman, set up a blog for me in Israel’s online newspaper *The Times of Israel*. For nearly three decades he has been my main Mitzvah resource person in Israel, as well as a personal friend and serious, meticulous (but gentle) critic of my writings for more than 40 years. At first, I wrote occasional Divray Torah, which he would post on the blog. Then, when COVID hit and I could no longer travel, at first I wrote a new Dvar Torah or revised a previous one every day. The result is this anthology and a separate, similar one called *Jewish VIP’s-Values Ideals and Principles*.

A note concerning some aspects of the style content of these Divray Torah

In my Divray Torah, I occasionally make reference to my attention deficit disorder (ADD). The difficulties of learning the “un-standard” way are well known, prominent characteristics: distraction, daydreaming, lack of focus, impatience, frequent frustration, inability to follow logical argument orally or in writing**, and the inability to read though anything lengthy.* **But** the advantages, once recognized, are also abundant. Among them are freedom of the restraint of logical or sequential thinking,** greater ease and range of free association, perhaps an exaggerated exhilaration when a task has been completed. The

blog format was ideal for me: It afforded me the freedom to choose any topic and to write in any style. This background may make it easier for you to read my Divray Torah.***

**After one of my talks during which I had mentioned that I always got straight A's in math through highschool, a special education teacher told me, "You got algebra, right? But you didn't get geometry."*

***Many people with A.D.D. struggle with logical and sequential statements either in print or orally transmitted. I recently found a quote from Niels Bohr, the Nobel Laureate in physics: Reacting to what someone had just said, he stated, "No, no, you're not thinking, you're just being logical."*

****As mentioned in several of these Divray Torah, because I often surf, scan, and skip around written material, I am often greatly rewarded by what I find. A most fortuitous example happened just a few days ago when I was arbitrarily leafing through the Encyclopaedia Judaica, Volume 7. A brief entry about Donald Arthur Glazer records, "At school he was so inattentive, that only the intervention of a psychologist prevented his being transferred to a school for backward children." In 1960, at age 34, he received the Nobel Prize in physics.*

So, many people may find it more comfortable to skip around or surf the many selections rather than read them consecutively. Therefore, with only a few exceptions, the Divray Torah are not listed sequentially.

B. Individuals Who Would Find These Divray Torah Unnecessary

All of us have met people who personify *Menschlichkeit*. They are naturally kind, decent, generous individuals of impeccable integrity — *Menschen*. It seems that being a *Mensch* is in their genes. The brief selections in this anthology are intimately connected to Jewish texts that have been preserved for us over more than two millennia. The ones I have selected are intended to show Judaism's insights into the nature and purpose of being Jewish and human. But "natural" *Menschen* already live their lives without any need for these texts. The word "Mitzvah" may not even be an essential word in their vocabulary.

As I considered this issue, I thought: Nevertheless, if those admirable people were interested, they might still benefit in two areas: (1) If they want to reinforce their Jewish identity, and (2) they may find some practical suggestions to refine and supplement their personal Mitzvah-activities.

C. Individuals with Little or No Background in Text Study

If your Jewish education did not include text study in the original Hebrew and Aramaic, your first move is to read Arthur Kurzweil's article/pamphlet *I Can't Read Much Hebrew, I Can't Read Much Aramaic, I Never Went to Yeshiva, But I Study Talmud Every Chance I Get. Brother, Can You Spare a Dime: The Treatment of Beggars According to Jewish Tradition: A Case in Point*.

You can find it online at https://dannysiegel.draimanconsulting.com/begging_kurzweil.pdf.

Arthur was a seminal American pioneer in Jewish genealogy. Following his own family research, he published a book as a practical guide for others, **From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History** which became very popular and encouraged great numbers of other people to do the same as he had done. Subsequently, he became a superb lecturer on Jewish texts as a guest speaker in many Jewish communities.

Our personal background is this: For many months over two years, Arthur and I studied Torah texts together, once a week. I worked from the texts in the original Hebrew and Aramaic. *BUT*, he had no educational background in either language. One particular day the topic was Judaism's view on giving to beggars. We agreed that he should research the subject and write up what he had found. The result was the article.

In my opinion, "**I Can't read much Hebrew...**" is the single most valuable resource — anywhere — for anyone who wants to study Jewish texts in English.

D. An important stylistic note about the texts: When I need to be focused, such as when I am choosing words, proofreading, or reviewing and correcting stylistic problems, I try to be particularly careful with one specific aspect of grammar. I believe that “*the poor*,” “*the homeless*,” “*the disabled*,” “*the mentally ill*” are all problematic phrases. That wording categorizes human beings, and turns them into abstracts. While I would not say that it dehumanizes them, it certainly depersonalizes them, and they are, most of all, persons. Even though more wordy and sometimes cumbersome, my preferred wording is to use “persons” or “individuals”: Poor *persons*, homeless *individuals* (or as my social worker niece Debbie Wilcox expresses it, “people who are experiencing homelessness”), *persons* with disabilities, *individuals* with mental illness.

A related analysis occurred when I asked my students, “Am I ‘a diabetic’ or ‘a person with diabetes?’” Our discussion helped me personally clarify that the latter is to be preferred.

Similar examples are “a homeless shelter”. Much preferred would be, “a shelter for homeless persons”. The same form applies to a “battered women’s shelter” which should be “a shelter for individuals and families who have been victims of domestic violence.” And even with that lengthy phrase, I prefer “individuals and families who are *survivors* of domestic violence.”

And, finally, signs for “handicapped parking” should read something like “parking spaces for persons with disabilities”.

Some texts, people, and ideas appear in different Divray Torah. The repetitions happened either because they were used in different contexts or were written on different days.

Aside from the poems, more than 90% of the material is new. Very few of the prose items have been taken (and revised) from my books.

E. Physically navigating this anthology — a special note:

The work on *Doing Good* was composed (before the appearance of *Sefaria*) on a Macintosh in an application called TextEdit. This was necessary because in other programs such as Microsoft Word, when the Hebrew and Aramaic material transferred from the JCL (Deluxe Edition) CD-ROM to Microsoft Word, the words would appear on the screen in reverse order.

Operating TextEdit presented additional difficulties, such as numbering pages. For example, in TextEdit, the page numbers are in the lower right, in a smaller font than I would have liked. Occasionally, you will also find that the last line on some pages prints only the top half of the words, the other half appearing on the next page. Adjusting one – say on page 21 — would throw off every subsequent page, which was just too daunting a task to reconfigure, review, and readjust again and again. Since the words are still legible, I left the lines as they were. In addition, I chose not to make a page separation between each Dvar Torah. Had I done so, the final result would have been too many pages and too cumbersome in my vision of this work. At first glance, the greater number of pages might have appeared too intimidating to a potential reader.

F. An absolutely critical resource for anything having to do with Tzedakah and Caring Mitzvahs

In 2013, my friend-of-many-years, Noam Sachs Zion, published a three-volume set of materials on Tzedakah, approximately 2,500 pages. He far exceeded in great depth any issue I had explored during my many years of writing about Tzedakah. The scope of what he covers is truly awesome. Despite enormous amounts of scholarship, it is user-friendly.

I already consider it a classic of Tzedakah literature.

The full titles should indicate a sense of the scope of this monumental work:

Volume I: From Each According to One’s Ability: Duties to Poor People. From the

Bible to the Welfare State and *Tikkun Olam*.

Volume II: To Each According to One's Social Needs. The Dignity of the Needy from Talmudic Tzedakah to Human Rights.

Volume III: For the Love of God: Comparative Religious Motivations for Giving. Christian Charity, Maimonidean Tzedakah and Lovingkindness (Hesed).

To obtain print copies:

<https://haggadahsrus.com/product/tzedakah-trilogy-all-three-volumes-print-version/>

It is also available digitally through Noam directly: noam.zion@gmail.com

G. A final, general comment

I take issue with people who *categorically* state that there is no such thing as black and white in Life, only shades of grey. That is certainly true about so much that we encounter in our lives. Nevertheless, I believe that doing Mitzvahs, performing kind, caring acts towards others are bright, illuminating, pure white lights — even if only momentary — in the course of a human being's existence.

***Moshe Rabbeynu, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Jonah, Amos,
and (at least) 10 others
Received Their Messages Directly From God***

Others read tea leaves.

I, who need my caffeine, pay attention to the words
on my two new matching coffee cups:

#1 ...First. ***Coffee!****

#2 Drink coffee, and do good!

*However, for those other people
who can (unfathomably to me) function without coffee —*

Hug and kiss your partner, and, if you have any, your children,
tell them you love them,

and do good.

Put \$1.00 (or a penny, nickel, dime, or quarter)

in the פּוּשְׁקָא/*pushka-Tzedakah box,*

and do more good.

Look out the window and see the trees in bloom, or snow, or rain,
and be grateful,

and do good.

Feed the dog and cat,

and do more good.

Do your morning *tai chi,*

and do good.

Check to see if your cellphone is charged,

and do good

(and only afterwards check the Dow Jones Industrial Average).

Walk your 5,000 or 10,000 steps,

and do good.

Look at your calendar and put at the top of the list of “things to do”
to **do good.**

Do good,

and — only then — remember to pick up the dry cleaning.

**The contemporary hierarchy of Civilization's Greatest Advances Toward Menschlich Living might read something like this: the Keurig, fast-forward button on the TV remote — right above the Internet — then arthroscopic surgery, and automatic parallel parking for automobiles.*

Making It Easier To Read My Divray Torah

1. One Additional Potentially Productive, Meaningful, And Entirely Permissible Method of Studying Torah

לזכר אחי מורי אברהם הלוי
Stanley Siegel
מעמיק בתורה

I. Early Early Morning: Sometimes before dawn, I used to spend a couple of hours studying some Torah or reading addictive page-turner detective and spy novels. The novel obsession lasted many months. Then that minor fixation on whodunits and Tales of The Mossad suddenly disappeared.

II. A Recent Change: I recently switched my early early morning Torah study or secular reading time to leafing through the 1973 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica (EJ)*. I randomly chose one volume from the 16 on the shelf. At that time, I had no plans to “do” all 16, nor, at present is it something I am considering. When I began, I had no idea how long this “project” would hold my attention before I would turn, again, purely by chance, to something else.

This has been the normal pattern in my education, the short attention span is no doubt attributable to my medically-certified attention deficit disorder. Presently, for example, during my time with the EJ, I browse, surf, or scan, and read only whatever interests me and ignore the rest. I’m long past “*coulda, shoulda, woulda*” education, like in college I “*shoulda*” taken a semester of Shakespeare instead of slogging through Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. I was quickly covering so much material *my way* in the EJ, I was absolutely certain that I would be exposed to many people, ideas, and facts that were completely new to me. Or I would finally fill in numerous details on topics that I didn’t know enough about but had always said to myself, “Some day I’ll get to it”.

With the EJ, this was my “some day”.

III. Some Results From Just A Few Days Inside The EJ:

(A) I discovered a real gem on my very first day — a new Mitzvah hero: Dame Myra Hess (1890-1956) was a renowned British pianist. During the Blitz, with Nazi bombs and V1 and V2 rockets falling on London, she organized concerts at the National Gallery to help maintain the morale of the terrified citizens. The music had the same effect as when young David played his harp to ease King Saul’s troubled mind.

(B) A column count [two columns/EJ page]:

“Hebrew grammar” — 98;

“History” — 211;

“Poland” — 80;

“The שואה/Shoah” — 82;

“ישראל/Israel” — 940,

“ירושלים/Jerusalem” — 213.

(C) How many Russian Jews that Baron de Hirsch sent to Argentina (where the gauchos learned to speak Yiddish and there is a town named “Moisesville”), the United States, and Canada to become farmers, safe and far away from the Czars’ murderous anti-Semitism.

(D) The world-renowned cellist Gregor Piatogosky was Jewish.

(E) I re-discovered חלקיהו הכהן הגדול/Chilkiahu The High Priest, who found the scroll of the Book of Deuteronomy, gave it to שפן הספר/Shaphan HaSofer-the Scribe, who gave to יאשיהו המלך/King Josiah, who then launched his historic reform.

(II Kings 22:8ff)

(F) After the expulsion from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1498, the names and writings of several of the great number of great Sefardi rabbis who scattered to North Africa, Italy, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Greece, and other countries, islands like Djerba, and cities like Constantinople, Amsterdam, Izmir, and Salonika, which became great centers of Torah.

(G) From the pre-World War II photographs, the beauty and grandeur of so many of the synagogues destroyed during Kristallnacht.

(H) How many Jews received the Nobel Prize for their work in chemistry and literature, besides the more well-known laureates in physics and medicine.

(I) Who were the pre-eminent experts in their field when the EJ was published in the 1970's. For example, every article about Biblical, Talmudic, and modern and ancient Israeli flora and fauna were written by Yehuda Feliks, and Gershom Scholem wrote *almost* article about Jewish mysticism.

IV. The EJ And The JE: Years ago I used the same method with *The Jewish Encyclopedia (JE)* of 1903. (Now online)

(א) To some cultural historians, the publication of the JE proved that Europe was no longer the exclusive center of Jewish scholarship.

(ב) I particularly noted that, shortly after settling in cities like Cincinnati, Louisville, and Minneapolis, among the first things the immigrant settlers did were to purchase land for a Jewish cemetery, establish free-loan societies, and found synagogues.

(ג) Names and places like Heydrich, Mengele, and Eichmann, Mauthausen, Maidanek, and Sobibor — all-too-frequently referenced and described in depth in the EJ — naturally were unknown to the editors in 1903. **יָד וַשֵּׁם/Yad VaShem** did not exist and there were no **חסידי אומות העולם/Chassidei Ummot HaOlam-Gentile rescuers of Jews from the שואה/Shoah** — and no need for them.

V. My Way Is Not For Everyone: Nothing about my approach is relevant for many — possibly most — people. The way their minds work and their method of study are completely different than mine. They, like my late brother Stanley, ז"ל, will not move on until they completely understand the material at hand. For me, and others like me, though, I am only offering another *possible* option for Torah-study.

A proviso: Obviously, everyone (including myself) encounters certain topics that necessarily require a close reading, slow, meticulous, detailed research, and serious thought such as the biochemical intricacies of COVID variants. But other than those complex topics, *if* my approach works for you with whatever Jewish topic you are reading.

לחיים - enjoy!

2. How Sherlock Holmes Helped Me Get All A's in Bible At The Jewish Theological Seminary

(Aleph) **A Partial Elementary Introduction To Biblical Hebrew** — I hope to provide you with two easy steps to give you entrée into studying the **תנ"ך/Tanach-Bible** in the original Hebrew. I say “easy” because all Hebrew words, ancient or modern, are based on a three-letter root. The search for those three letters in their many grammatical configurations and range of meanings is very tantalizing. Don't be intimidated or consider this project too daunting. *You don't have to be a rocket scientist* or a scholar of ancient Semitic languages, archeology of The Holy Land, history, or culture to do it.

(Bet) **My Own Approach** — Because of those tempting three letters, I personally learned to emphasize *words* in my **תנ"ך/Tanach** studies. This approach provides me with *immediate* and *frequent* pleasures ranging from mildly good feelings to palpable thrills to

enlightening, illuminating and occasionally even revelatory moments.

Lately, I've come to realize that I work like Sherlock Holmes solving a crime. Holmes might notice an unusual postage stamp in a victim's drawer, an out-of-place kitchen utensil, or a strange smudge on the carpet, and would connect those clues to lead him to the perpetrator. *A lá* Holmes, nowadays police, P.I.'s, forensic pathologists, and other investigators — with all their modern databanks and sophisticated electronic tools — discover, uncover, analyze, interpret, connect, and pursue the implications of the clues, and catch the “perp” — which is precisely the meaning of Deuteronomy 16:20:

צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוּף

Tzedek Tzedek tirdof—“Justice Justice you must pursue!”

(Gimel) The Two Best Techniques For Discovering And Interpreting The Word-

Clues — To be successful, you have to be curious, and sensitive to words that do not match the standard “wooden” translations. You will come to “feel” that something is “off”, will then ask the right questions, and ultimately find your way to the solution. Here are some examples that might confront you: How/why does דָּבָר/*davar* mean both *word* and *thing*? How/why does the root כָּבֵד mean *heavy, honor, glory, dignity, success, or the liver*? How/why can the root צֶדֶק mean everything from *justice*, to *justified, straight, vindication, right, righteous, innocent, צֶדֶקָה-using your money to benefit others, success, or victory*? One of my favorites is the word מִדְּבָר/*midbar* — *wilderness OR desert*. How you translate it in a particular passage makes a *biiiiig* difference if you are trying to picture the Children of Israel wandering around in a desert or wilderness for 40 years before their descendants reached the Promised Land. Of a more abstract nature is יִרְאָה/*yir'ah* which can mean either “**fear**” or “**awe**”, and, therefore, it is often difficult to determine the correct translation in many contexts.

(Clue-Technique #1) Obviously, the *context* will determine the intended meaning. The example that immediately comes to mind is the word הִנֵּה/*hinay*, which is frequently translated “Behold”. I think we would agree that when Jacob wakes up in the morning and discovers Leah in his bed instead of Rachel, הִנֵּה/*hinay* emphatically means, “Uh, oh!” or, “What’s going on here?!” “Behold” hardly captures Jacob’s reaction.

Another example of context is in Deuteronomy 25:1: After a court’s verdict is rendered, the legal term for the innocent party is called the צַדִּיק/*tzaddik*, whether or not that person is personally a מַעֲנֵטֶשׁ/*Mensch* or a מַמְזֵר/*momzer-S.O.B.* The רָשָׁע/*rasha* is the guilty party — fine human being though that person may actually be.

The prose sections provide most of the examples of **Clue-Technique #1**. But I (and, no doubt, Holmes,) particularly like **Clue-Technique #2**, which is found in the poetry (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve so-called “Minor” Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and scattered passages elsewhere throughout the תַּנַּ"ךְ/*Tanach*). The only electronic tool you will need is a computer with either a disk containing the digitized Hebrew תַּנַּ"ךְ/*Tanach* or internet access to סֵפֶרִיָה/*Sefaria*. Their search engines will instantaneously display every instance of any specific word. You will also need to have right next to you the Jewish Publication Society’s (JPS) 1985 English translation *Tanakh**, which is absolutely the best one for your purpose. The earlier 1963 edition was the most important resource for my own progress. In addition, as you progress in your study of תַּנַּ"ךְ/*Tanach*, you will definitely find useful the “BDB”: *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Brown, Driver, and Briggs. (Now online) For every definition of individual roots, the BDB directs you to the appropriate verses to see the word in context.

To understand **Clue-Technique #2**, you will need to know one essential fact about Biblical poetry: A verse is built on parallelism. This standard stylistic pattern means that:

(1) The meaning of the first half (A) of a verse, is repeated — but in different words — in the second half (B). For example, אִישׁ-אָדָם=*person*, and חֵכְמָה=בִּינָה=*wisdom*, or

(2) (B) states the opposite of (A) — בָּד/טוֹר=*bad/good* and לַיִל/יוֹם=*night/day* or

(2) (B) states the opposite of (A) — *טוב/בט*-bad/good and *חזק/חלש*-strong/weak, or
 (3) (B) uses a word associated with another word in (A) — for example, **שמים/ארץ-earth/Heaven** and **כסף/זהב-silver/gold**.

Job 28:17 illustrates the synonymous ($A=B$) type,

לא־יֵעָרְכָּנָה זָהָב וְזָכוּכִית
 וְתַמּוּרְתָּהּ כְּלִי־פָז

If you don't know the meaning of **פז**, since it is parallel to **זהב**, it also must mean "gold".**

This is the really fun part. As your examples multiply, you will become more attuned to catching nuances. As a result, your translations will make increasingly more sense, even the ones very remote from what you had originally thought possible.

Have at it!

(Dalet) Feeling Ambitious? — Start with **נפש/נפש**, which can mean *person, neck/throat, corpse, self, death, gravestone, or living being*. You may still be having difficulty freeing yourself of the rigid "old" translations, e.g., **נפש/נפש** — *neck/throat?* Absolutely!

Jonah 2:6:

Water surrounded my neck,
 or Psalm 69:2 —

אֶפְפוּנֵי מַיִם עַד־נַפְשִׁי

Deliver me, O God, save me,
for the water is up to my neck.

Or try **יד/yad** — *hand, strength, side, portion, share, place, or monument*. From there, go to the roots **לבב, זמר, שפט, קדש, ספר, ערב, שלם, and הלל**.

If this subject doesn't "grab you", isn't your "thing", move on to another aspect of **תנ"ך/Tanach** that interests you personally such as archeology, Biblical women heroes, or ancient near eastern law. Only — whatever you choose — *pursue it with passion*.

However, if **תנ"ך/Tanach**-in-Hebrew *does* interest you —
Have at it and have fun!

**As stated above, the previous edition was published while I was an undergraduate at JTS, and was crucial to my first steps to more advanced Biblical studies.*

***The Book of Proverbs-משלי is an especially good place to start, since it has many examples of parallelisms that are relatively easy to decipher.*

3. Five Crucial Yiddish Words* To Keep In Mind When Doing Mitzvahs

(Aleph) I have found that the following five Yiddish words describing a person's essential character can serve as a useful guide to an individual's study of Torah and the connection to Mitzvah activity:

(A) With Jewish texts, it will help us select material that will deal with human interactions, and give us useful insights as to the meaning of the text.

(B) Away from the written word or Oral Torah we hear, i.e., in Life, these words can direct us to the Best of the Best human beings. They can then help us get a better sense of our Selves, and what we might want to be doing with our lives.

A mnemonic word is MASHEZ:

1. “M”: מענטש/*Mensch*-an authentic human being, i.e., decent, honest, virtuous, humble, kind, giving, caring, compassionate, generous.

[pl: *Menschen*, common English usage – *Mensches*; adj: *Menschlich*; abstract: *Menschlichkeit*]

2. “A”: אײדל/*aydel*-a *Mensch* but with an additional element of nobility-of-, delicacy-of-, gentility-of-soul. To say of someone that he or she has an איידלע נשמה/*edele Neshama*-A noble soul is extraordinarily high praise. This is what Rachel of the Akiva-Rachel love story sensed in an apparently crude shepherd when the Midrash says she saw that he was מעלי-*ma'alay* from the root עלה “up, high”, (like in “עליה/*aliyah*”). There was something high, extraordinary about him.

The Yiddish contrasts sharply with the German “Edel” which means high-born, like a duchess, marquis, earl, or princess.

3. “SH”: שײן/*shayn*-beautiful. To call someone א שיינער ייד/*a shayner Yid*-a beautiful Jew, is a very high compliment.

4. “E”: ערלעך/*ehrlich*-honest, a person of the greatest integrity

5. “Z”: זיס/*ziess*-sweet, א זיסער ייד/*a ziesser Yid*-a sweet Jew or א זיסער מאן/*a ziesser mann*-a sweet person is the kind of individual with whom we would want to associate.

You can add: פֿײן/*fein*-fine, just like in English.

(*Bet*) If your ancestors were expelled from Spain in 1492 or six years later from Portugal and fled to Iraq, North Africa, Turkey, and other parts of the Diaspora, you spoke Ladino, based on Spanish.

So how do you say the German-based *Mensch* in Spanish-based Ladino? Despite variations in vocabulary in different countries, I had to choose someone to provide a local Ladino answer. So I asked my close friend Rabbi Abe Morhaim — a descendant of Turkish Jews.

He replied, “hombre bueno” or “hombre precioso”**.

(*Gimel*) That says it all

*Please allow for my faulty spelling in Yiddish.

**Feminine — “*mujer buena/preciosa*”. The “j” is pronounced “zh”.

Mitzvahs Tzedakah and Gemillut Chassadim

A Prayer of Responsibility for Children

We pray for children who put chocolate fingers everywhere, who like to be tickled, who stomp in puddles and ruin their new pants, who sneak popsicles before supper, who erase holes in math workbooks, who can never find their shoes...

And we pray for those who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire, who can't bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers, who never "counted potatoes", who are born in places in which we wouldn't be caught dead, who never go to the circus, who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for children who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions, who sleep with the dog and bury goldfish, who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money, who cover themselves with Band-aids and sing off key, who squeeze toothpaste all over the sink, who slurp their soup.

And we pray for those who never get dessert, who have no safe blanket to drag behind them, who watch their parents watch them die, who can't find any bread to steal, who don't have any rooms to clean up, whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser, whose monsters are real...

We pray for children who spend all their allowance before Tuesday, who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick their food, who like ghost stories, who shove dirty clothes under the bed and never rinse out the tub, who love visits from the tooth fairy, who don't like to be kissed in front of the school bus, who squirm in church or temple and scream in the phone...

And we pray for those whose nightmares come in the daytime, who will eat anything, who have never seen a dentist, who aren't spoiled by anybody, who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep, who live and move and have no being.

We pray for children who want to be carried and for those who must, for those we never give up on and for those who will grab the hand of anyone kind enough to offer it.

Hear our cries, Adonai, and listen to our prayers. Amen.

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4. Unquestionably The Greatest Salad Dressing in Human History

It all started with the salad dressing that Paul Newman made for his family. So, someone suggested that since it was so tasty, he should make some for friends. Next, because his friends liked it so much, a friend suggested that he market it.

At first, he was reluctant, and even when he agreed, he hesitated to put his face on the label.

“Newman’s Own” company was formed in 1982 and, as everyone knows, he finally agreed to have friendly caricatures of his face on the label — in various outfits depending on which product was being sold.

From the very beginning, Paul agreed that *all* of the after-tax profits would be donated to worthy recipients.

Paul Newman died in 2006. For 24 years he had the unique pleasure of an unexpected, astonishing, near-endless supply of money to do immense good for other people.

By the time he passed away, I think it was close to half a Billion (capital B) dollars*. A recent article reported that his Newman’s Own Tzedakah fund — now run by his daughter Clea — had reached \$740,000,000.

(Aleph) A Couple Of Facts About Paul’s Mitzvah Work:

1. Lest we think he simply hired a group of professionals to completely run the organization without his input — not so. The stories of his personal involvement are legion. My favorite is: When he was told that a bus for kids with special needs was broken beyond repair, he simply said “Buy them a new one.”

2. He built a camp in Connecticut for kids with serious and life-threatening diseases. He named it The Hole in Wall Gang Camp for the **החברה/chevra** in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. There are now more than a dozen camps associated with the one he founded, including one in Israel. (“Jordan River Village”).

(Bet) Some Biographical Background In Preparation For My Imaginary Meeting With Paul Newman

A. Paul’s father was a Jewish immigrant from Germany who settled in a Jewish neighborhood in Cleveland where Paul grew up. His mother was a practicing Christian Scientist.

B. Although he was not an actively practicing Jew, by all reports he always considered himself Jewish.

(Gimel) Paul Newman and Me

א. In 2004, I was invited to give a week-end series of lectures at a synagogue in Westport, Connecticut, which was a few miles from Paul’s home.

ב. I asked my hosts to try to arrange for me to meet him. They tried, but it just didn’t work out.

ג. Nevertheless, I had already worked out in my mind what my side of the conversation would be.

ד. I don’t know if he was given a Hebrew name, but this is how I planned to begin:

Pinchas, I loved you in Butch Cassidy. You and Redford were the perfect match. You were awesome. So, too, for The Sting, Cool Hand Luke, and The Hustler. And obviously, I carry you as Ari Ben Canaan in Exodus in a special place in my heart.

Even more, I have an article from Life Magazine from September 1988. One of the pictures shows you in what looks like the camp dining room. You are looking at two of “your campers”, and you have the most gorgeous, deep — I almost said “beatific” — smile on your face.

I know that you must have smiled and felt good after finishing one of your blockbuster films.

But that smile in Life Magazine, was different. It came from some place very

deep in your soul. From the look on your face, I saw who you really are — for all your spectacular fame in the movies. You're all about doing good.

When it comes to Mitzvahs, you are "The Man".

* The following is pure speculation on my part: After the first round of spectacular success — a few million dollars — he could have said, "Enough! I've made my point, and already given away millions." I don't think people would have found fault with him. But he didn't do that, and I don't think it even entered his mind. He had made this Mitzvah-commitment and he was going to keep his word. It may be — and again, this is purely speculative — that his growing up in that Jewish neighborhood with its emphasis on Tzedakah — may have been reinforced in his consciousness to a certain degree. What is certain is that he was so emotionally and spiritually moved by the immense good he had done, he might have thought, "Why stop? This just keep getting better and better."

The Wise Words of an Old Washerwoman from Mississippi

Oseola McCarty died in 1999 at age 91 in Hattiesburg, Mississippi where she had lived her entire life. Because she had to provide care of a sick aunt, her education ended in the 6th grade.

For nearly 75 years she worked as a washerwoman, washing the clothes *by hand*. Even though some people had given her a washing machine sometime in the 1960's, Ms. McCarty refused to use it. She felt it just couldn't do as good a job as she could with soap, a hot tub of water, and a washboard. She was paid in dollar bills, coins, a handful of cash.

When the arthritis in her hands made it impossible to do the work, she finally retired. By then, having lived a simple life for decades, she had \$280,000 in the bank. She had made friends with some of the staff at the bank who advised her about her savings. And because of this connection, when Ms. McCarty decided to donate part of the money to a worthy cause, she established a scholarship fund for female African-American students at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM). She wanted these young women to have opportunities she never had, and the hope for a bright future.

The university is right there in Hattiesburg. She had never been to the campus.

It was a different world.

She put **\$150,000** in the fund! And 60% of her estate would be added when she would pass away. (The other 40% was for her church and three friends.)

Deeply moved by Ms. McCarty's act, other individuals in the local community supplemented her initial donation, doubling the total in the fund.

Once her Tzedakah fund began to give out scholarships, she met some of the students. Pictures and videos of their meetings are so beautiful and moving, there is nothing to be embarrassed about tearing up when you look at them

As the story of Ms. McCarty's donation spread, many honors followed, including an honorary doctorate from USM and Harvard. There is a life-size bronze sculpture of her on the campus sitting in a chair. Particularly striking is another part of the sculpture: Next to Ms. McCarty is an empty chair, and people are welcome to sit next to her.

All this is an introduction to why this has been placed in this anthology:

Many media naturally wanted to cover her story. One particular account touched me very deeply:

When a journalist from *Parade Magazine* asked her why she didn't spend the money on herself, she replied, "I am spending it on myself."

5. The Four Questions
We Might Want To Ask Ourselves
Before We Continue To Engage In More Mitzvahs

The Question We Need to Ask Before We Ask The Four Questions:

“What are the other person’s needs?”

Then, and only then, should we ask The Four Questions

The Four Questions

1. “What am I good at?”
2. “What do I like to do?”
3. “Whom do I know?”
4. “Why not?”

The First Question: “What Am I Good At?”

I am not sure I know where talent comes from, and I am not certain people who have studied talent, written about it, or worked with talented people can tell you either. The theories range from “Practice. Practice. Practice”, to “You’re born with it”, to “Give us a 3-year-old with 10 fingers and we’ll have him/her playing Beethoven at Carnegie Hall by the time he/she is Bar/Bat Mitzvah.” And naturally everything in between.

The theories don’t interest me. What excites me are the answers I get when I ask audiences, “What are you good at?” The responses come pouring out (sometimes slowly, but once they start, no one can stop them):

*trumpet playing, making Caesar salads, goofing around,
calligraphy, finger painting and face painting,
reading stories to kindergarten kinderlach
gently coaxing people to part with their money for noble Mitzvah,
watching football games on TV, a tablet, or phone,
listening sympathetically to the worries and troubles of other people,
holding their hands,
hugging when necessary,
crying with them, when needed,
and offering comfort and hope,
organizing meetings, parenting, hugging,
fixing broken sinks and ’67 Pontiacs,
bringing a Tzedakah box to a pick-up basketball game
and asking the other players and coach
to put some money in before the game starts.*

All good for Mitzvahs.

For example:

Addicted football-game-watchers on TV, particularly people who like to surf the channels, so they can follow three games at once, can be assigned to the homes of other football lovers who used to love to click click click through the channels, but whose hands (perhaps arthritic now) can’t do it any longer.

For example:

*Caesar salad makers can add their exquisite touch for holiday parties
at shelters for battered women and their children, or
join the volunteers who cook for people incapacitated for whatever reason
and who have a taste for quality anchovies and garlic
but who can’t put it all together, or*

*organize The Great Caesar Salad Chef Competition
as a scholarships-for-camp fund raiser, or
teach the cooks at soup kitchens how to make a really tasty caesar salad that
the hungry people will enjoy,
and who will thereby supplement their nutritional needs.*

Only Caesar Salad Pros can do that sort of thing.

*Cooks who live on pre-packaged microwavable dinners from Trader Joe's
need not apply.*

And for example:

Gold-Medal-Quality Huggers, as well as Silver and Bronze Medal Huggers,
are needed just about everywhere in the World of Mitzvahs
and the world at large.

Things to ask ourselves when asking "What am I good at?"

A. "What am I extremely good at?"

B. "What can I do possibly better than anyone else in the entire world?"

***C. "What was I good at, but had neglected over the course of busy years,
because I got occupied with too many other, less significant, things?"***

***D. "What do I think I am good at
but haven't taken the time yet to try it
in the context of Mitzvahs?"***

***E. "What did everyone else tell me
that I was a Class-A bozo at,
but maybe they were wrong?"***

***F. "What did teachers/parents/friends/experts tell me
that I was bad at but,
later on, or much later on,
I myself discovered I was really good at?"***

The Second Question: "What Do I Like to Do?"

(Which Some People Have Told Me Really Should Be Question #1)

1. Nothing

*at least once a year on a warm beach on Maui
while a high percentage of people
in the northern United States and Canada
are digging out of blizzards
and layering their clothing with
long underwear, double socks, long-sleeve shirts, sweater,
light coat, heavy coat, double gloves,
and a woolen cap inside another woolen cap.*

2. Drink double-shot, non-fat lattes

*(regular in the morning,
decaf the rest of the day).*

3. Get up at 4:00 a.m.

***4. Nap at least once, maybe twice, at no particular time of day
to make up for getting up at 4:00 a.m.***

***5. Pet cats, Mitzvah dogs,
and other dogs***

*that don't constantly bark and claw at your leg
when you walk in your host's door.*

6. Try to teach African gray parrots

*the first four chapters of *The Book of Leviticus*.*

7. Count my accumulated air miles while taking a walk.

Things you might like to do:

- a. Every 10 days
eat ravenously and irresponsibly
(*diet be damned*)
through a bag of miniature Snickers™ bars while
watching a terribly soppy movie or a scary vampire flick on TV.
- b. Knit afghans and 3-foot long scarves.
- c. Go through dumpsters and ask the merchants,
“Why did you throw out this perfectly good loaf of bread?
You could have donated it to...”
- d. Wash mountains of dirty clothes.
(*Yes, Virginia, it takes all kinds of people to make this world!*)
- e. Read stories to little kids.
- f. Read stories (with milk and cookies) to adults
who have a wretched cold and bronchitis and
who are exhausted and angry at the microscopic creatures
that made them feel so weak.
They just may need to hear or have someone read to them
Alice in Wonderland or *Where The Wild Things Are* again.
- g. Drive all night from point A to point B.
- h. Bungee jump in a wheelchair.
(*Yes, Virginia, I saw an article — complete with photographs —
about one such person.*)

More implications of the question:

All of these “like-to’s” can also be applied to Mitzvahs.

As I wrote above, even if you occasionally like to do nothing at all.

Think of all the strung-out people who are running around frantically in their jobs or overloaded from worry about family health problems who just need to get away to some Nowhere, to have some time to breathe, to relax, to admire the abundance of colorful leaves in the Fall, and *then* return to their regular lives, refreshed, energized, and more able to cope. There are a very great number of kids (and adults) who desperately need A Few Hours Away From It All, munching chips or popcorn while watching Bella Lugosi go for the neck, reciting, “I want to suck your bloood”.

All of these “like-to’s” can be harnessed to Mitzvahs.

I learned an important lesson from my students: There is an advantage to starting with things we like to do instead of things we are good at. They would prefer to change **Question #2** to **#1**. The simple reason is that many people are good at things they hate to do. No doubt there are people out there who are excellent violinists and ice skaters who were pushed to practice or work out in the rink throughout their childhood, and were told over and over again to be the very best that they can be. But they hated the pressure, hated performing, hated proving themselves to their parents, most of all hated hated hated practicing. Now they would do better to find things that they *like* to do, such as throw a barbecue for kids recovering from drug abuse. Or to tie colored balloons into funny shapes in a pediatrics ward to make the kids smile.

Maybe it was because their parents never told them *why* they should be the best they could possibly be. Perhaps, in retrospect, there may be some anger that they were never told that they were created to do Mitzvahs. Now all that angry energy can be transformed — through liking what they do — into happiness for others (and ourselves). In addition, they will automatically have more stamina to do Mitzvahs if they are enjoying themselves.

A note of clarification: The key word in “What do I like to do?” is “*like*”. That question is different than “What am I passionate about doing”.

While it is true that passion usually contributes great energy to potential Mitzvahs,

there is the danger that it will fuel visions of a greatly expanded project/program.

It may be — and sometimes happens — that you will not be able to manage the rapid growth in your Mitzvah-work. Too fast and extensive an expansion may become unmanageable without the proper administrative and fundraising skills. These may be beyond a founder's capabilities, and most often, will draw the well-intentioned person away from his or her original personal front-line Mitzvah-work. Instead, some of them have become full-time fundraisers to support their Mitzvah-program. I have unfortunately witnessed this progression several times.

However, this is not an absolute rule. I have witnessed the opposite end of the spectrum: Nothing short of spectacular success with enormously expanded programs that started with a single simple Mitzvah. Despite the added burden of the expansion, some Mitzvah heroes still manage to do the immediate, face-to-face **חסדים גמילות/Gemillut Chassadim-personal acts of loving, caring kindness.**

The Third Question: "Whom Do I Know?"

Need a car mechanic to repair the car of a person living in an economically precarious position? Someone reliable who will do it at cost or for free?

We should have one of those on our phone number and e-mail address lists of contacts in our cellphones.

Need someone who knows how to gift-wrap presents in a particularly lovely way? We all know that it's one thing to give someone a gift, and quite another to give it with that special touch that shows that we really care.

We should have one of those people, too, on our Mitzvah phone number and e-mail list in the phone.

Need a rich person or middle-income person or generous poor person who can make \$100 available if you send a simple, brief text or make a phone call — no questions asked and on the spot — so some Mitzvah that needs to be done can be done right away?

Add it to the lists of "Whom do I Know?"

A 10-year-old champion net surfer?

Put it on the list.

A travel agent who knows which airlines might waive fare rules so family members can fly to the bedside of a dying relative without paying the exorbitant cost of a same-day ticket?

A must reference for Mitzvahs.

We should add more names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses as we think of them. Or better yet, take time to consciously assemble this list.

And a message for list makers, including ***those people who make a list of all their lists, take note:***

In my opinion, this is the most important list of all.

It is The Mother of All Mitzvah-Lists.

The Fourth Question: "Why Not?"

Why not do as David Levitt did, namely, approach the school board and superintendent about donating leftover food from the entire county's school cafeterias?

Why not learn to juggle, to clown, to do magic tricks?

Why not give your employees one day off a month so that they can scatter into the community and paint and fix and feed hungry people and check dumpsters for wasted food and give uplift and hope to lonely individuals?

But

**BEWARE OF
"YOU CAN'T DO IT BECAUSE YOU CAN'T DO IT"
TYPE OF REASONING.**

Here's a classic example of that bad way of thinking: I once asked a group of 4th, 5th, and 6th graders to give me all the reasons why hospitals can't have a visiting dog program.* They gave the usual answers: Fear of dogs, allergies, noise, control of the animal's body functions, and what happens if the dog runs wild?

Then a 4th grader answered, "**It's because there's a sign that says 'No dogs allowed'!**"

In light of this child's stunning and very wise answer, the one that cut right to the very essence of so many Mitzvahs-that-never-happen, perhaps it is time we make a list of all the things we have been told we can't do, and then ask ourselves, "**Why not?**" If the answer is insufficient, ask again, "**Why not?**", and if the answers we get from our true Selves are still insufficient, silly, or downright dumb, then, forget the answers to questions #1-3, and just go out and do it.

As my friend, Janis Knight, reminded me, this fourth question is a particularly tough one, because if we reach the conclusion that *there really is no reason why not to do it* — to do some major, minor, or middle-range Mitzvah project takes a commitment of time, perhaps some risk, and the psychological need to redefine ourselves as greater, more powerful people than we used to be.

Change and growth involve risks. Change-and-growth-through-Mitzvahs involves a unified bundle of human character, but, in my opinion, is a risk worth taking.

One Last Thing To Consider In Your Mitzvah-Work

Ask ourselves, "When we were in need, what did it feel like to be the beneficiary of others' efforts?"

It might have been when we were exhausted from the flu, and someone made certain to sit by our bedside to make us drink a lot of fluids so we wouldn't dehydrate.

It might have been when our car wouldn't start, and we needed to get to a very important meeting or Mitzvah, and a friend or stranger came by just then and drove us to our destination.

I remember the one time that I needed a wheelchair. I had hurt my back a few days before and was only beginning to walk reasonably well. When I was going home after a lecture tour, after the plane landed and I was back at the terminal, the pain was so great, I needed to be wheeled from the gate down to the taxi stand. I felt helpless, and — worse — because and it was my first time I needed a wheelchair.

It was even more personally difficult because I would be wheeled around in public. Would people stare? Who would lift the carry-on bag up to my lap? Would the person ease me gently in and out of the chair? Would he or she tell me bad jokes on the way to the taxi stand to make me feel good? Would the person talk to me like a baby or child? Would I be pleasant in return, or would I be in too much pain, or be too worried that I had done some permanent damage and wouldn't feel like being nice to anyone? Should I give him or her a tip for doing his or her job? I don't wish those feelings on anyone.

As it happened, my recovery continued according to its natural course, and in a few days I was fine, but, since this incident happened years ago, I have had many occasions to recall those feelings. They are obviously very useful when considering setting out to do and being occupied in Mitzvah work. I think this should be a General Rule of interpersonal behavior, that will refine our sensibilities as it does on the essence of the act: The need for dignity, alleviating pain, one human being interacting with another in the most noble way humanly possible.

**Considerably more than 50 programs exist in hospitals around the U.S.*

6. It Wouldn't Hurt

Warning: Some phrases and especially the punch lines in the following old Jewish joke sound much better in Yiddish:

A funeral is being held in the synagogue. The coffin is in the front of the sanctuary, a couple of feet from the Bima. The rabbi begins the eulogy about the deceased, "Michael was a *Mensch*, a fine man, a **בעל צדקה/bal tzedoko**, generous. He danced at every *simcha*, sat quietly by the mourners at their *shivas*, and was always the first one in *shul* for the morning *minyan*.

Suddenly, from the back of the room, someone shouts, "Give him some chicken soup!"

The Rabbi ignores the outburst and continues with his honest praise for the deceased man, **ער איז געוויין אן ערלעכער ייד-Er iz gevayn an ehlicher Yid-He was an honest man**, with a truly **זיסע נשמה/ziessa neshoma-sweet soul... פיינער ייד/a feiner Yid-a fine Jew**.

Once again from the back of the room in a loud voice that everyone could hear, "Give him some chicken soup!"

This happens once or twice more, and finally the rabbi looks up from his notes, gazes toward the back and says, **עס וועט גאר ניט העלפן/Es vet gor nit helfen-it won't help.**

Then, once again from the back, the Voice: **עס וועט גאר ניט שאטן/Es vet gor nit schatten-It wouldn't hurt!**

I've known this joke for years, but it finally clicked as I was leaving a waiting room somewhere recently and noticed almost all of the others staring intensely and deeply engaged in what they were watching on their little illuminated cellphone screens. The scene is nothing new nowadays. We see it on buses, the Washington Metro, people standing in line for a Kosher hot dog at Nationals Park during the third inning of a slow game, even people waiting outside the doors of the bathrooms during intermission at a revival of *Fiddler on the Roof*, waiting for 23 people ahead of them to finish because they didn't leave their seats quickly enough.

So I came up with this:

If just 1/500,000th of the people on cellphones at any given moment put them away and substituted any edition of *Pirkay Avot* and acted on its wise words, wouldn't this be a better world for all of us?

True, it wouldn't stop Iran and North Korea from threatening the world with nuclear catastrophe, wouldn't stem the flow of tragedies from the tidal-wave-presence, abuse, subsequent deaths, from oxycontin, or a certain percentage of unhinged psychopaths murdering innocent schoolchildren and their teachers.

Still, I believe, when you get down to it:

It wouldn't hurt.

7. From Perlman's Stradivarius To The Bösendorfer-Mitzvah

How a 1714 Stradivarius Became a Twentieth Century Fiddle

(Aleph) One Unforgettable Night in Jerusalem that I Experienced Many Years Ago:

There was no question that this was going to be a sublime evening. Itzhak Perlman was performing in the Jerusalem Theater. Friends had bought me a ticket for a seat close to the stage. As I walked down the aisle, I could see many people in the audience were obviously cultured Jerusalemites. They had come to hear classical music at its finest.

That was probably three decades ago, when memory confuses things and fogs some details. I don't recall if Perlman played Beethoven, Schubert, or Mozart. But I *do* remember that, as expected, he was absolutely dazzling, and there was a loud enthusiastic response from the audience — including classical music *mavens* who knew far better than I that his performance had been exquisite.

To be more specific, as is customary when Itzhak Perlman performs, there were two or three minutes of absolute silence between his final notes and the audience reaction. Everyone waited for him to take hold of his metal crutches, pull himself up from his chair, stand up, and bow.

(Bet) Mr. Stadivarius's Exquisite Instrument

Only then did the hundreds of classical music lovers allow themselves to release the pent-up emotions that had accumulated during his performance of the masterpieces. The long, sustained, loud applause and standing ovation demonstrated that Perlman had demonstrated the proper respect to the composers. It is possible that a few people were transported back in their memories to similar great concerts they had enjoyed in Berlin, Vienna, and Budapest before the Nazis tore apart the soul of European civilization.

Despite the many years that have passed since that glorious night in Jerusalem, I *do* absolutely remember The Divine Itzhak's encore.

No one who was there could forget what happened. Suddenly, and without warning, he transformed himself from being a world-class violinist to a country fiddler when he began playing *bluegrass* tunes. He had, changed his priceless Stradivarius into a country fiddle.*

When I looked around, I calculated the audience's reaction: *Everyone* was surprised, *a few* were stunned and unhappy, and *most* people greatly enjoyed themselves from the change in mood from the sublime earlier pieces to the pure fun of the *maestro's* new selections.

But most of all, it was obvious that Itzhak Perlman was enjoying himself immensely.

Trust me on this one. I *really* did see it happen and heard bluegrass played on a priceless Stradivarius, just as I remembered the same tunes on the radio from my childhood in Virginia.

(Gimel) The Bösendorfer-Mitzvah:

The preferred instrument of many of the world's most famous pianists is the Bösendorfer grand. It can sell for upwards of \$500,000 and is the modern piano equivalent of the violin's Stradivarius.

Sometime later, when I recalled that evening listening to Itzhak Perlman working wonders on his Stradivarius, I began fantasizing about a high-powered fundraiser for a worthy cause in the grand ballroom of the swankiest hotel in some American city. As I pictured the scene, the women are decked out in elegant designer gowns and exquisite jewelry** the men, mixing with friends in classy \$1,000 tailored tuxedos. To add to the

serious atmosphere of the event, the sponsors have rented a Bösendorfer and hired a Van Cliburn-level pianist in tails to play forty minutes of classical music after the speeches and appeal for large donations — to bring a fitting close to an elegant Mitzvah-evening. Watching her fingers fly over the keyboard as she performed a particularly demanding Tchaikovsky composition and two Chopin Polonaises, the people are awed and exhilarated.

And then, à la Perlman, this maestra of the piano, suddenly and unexpectedly begins to play a dreamy, slow waltz from the Sixties. Many couples rise and take to the dance floor. Then she plays a fox trot, a lively (but not wild) tango, and a few more dance numbers before concluding with another slow waltz – this one Viennese. Everyone, everyone, feels absolutely terrific.

But that's not the end of the evening.

Because everyone feels *so* wonderful and so *alive*, many go back to their pledge cards on the dinner tables to significantly increase their donations.

It is now possible to state **The Bösendorfer-Mitzvah-Principle:**

People are more likely to increase their commitment-to-do-good when they are having fun.

**Undoubtedly, the bands at the annual bluegrass festivals in Galax, Virginia, would have asked Perlman to jam with them.*

***Yiddish: They were all “פארפיצט/farpitzt”.*

All Red White and Blue, We American Kids

**I. All red white and blue, we American kids
fell for it:**

**Dr. Kildare, Ben Casey, Dr. Handsome This,
Surgeon That, eight minutes each television hour
sweating behind a mask and saving them all
on the table.**

**Life and death were in their hands
and *only* in their hands. Or so it seemed.**

**Here a snip, there retract, patches and pumps in the innards
and all kinds of miracles happened right before our eyes.**

America's Saviors All: the cardio-neuro-ortho surgeons.

It cut us, the common folk, out of miracles.

(But Tzedakah saves from death.)

**II. And then along came Tzedakah
on a snorting white steed, rearing high on its legs.**

**All of a sudden people bought food,
wrote checks, sat at hotlines, and shopped for the shut-ins.**

They drove the lonely to synagogue.

They took in children wandering the streets.

They counseled and pushed

and made shiny wrapped packages called Dignity and Hope

and delivered them to Old Age Homes

complete with a choir of youth group kids,

every age unafraid of wrinkles and bends.

(Tzedakah saves from despair and death.)

The kids brought their pets to the sick
and sick at heart to be petted
and played with, smiled at, cooed over,
and you would be hard pressed, you would,
to tell just who exactly was saved from death:
the pettor or the pettee or the kid with the puppy
who missed a little homework because
he was too busy at the Home for the Lonely
which is located in All Neighborhoods in Every Town
in America
day, night, snow, sleet, rain and sun times,
shooing away death with a gentle bark and a purr and touch.
(Tzedakah saves.)

Whole troops of them!
The infinite team of salvation makers
and life restorers:
the teacher, the real estate broker, his daughter,
the toy maker, towel dealer, and mechanic,
the academic by day and spoon feeder by night,
regiments of the fat and short and average,

Cary Grant bodies and nerd faces,
PhDs and twelve-year-olds
(saving Tzedakah from death.)

Yes. Indeed.
There's a battalion, an army or two out there,
in jeans, and sweatshirts, slacks, blouses,
loafers, scarves and gloves—
just your run-of-the-mill normal people—
squeezing into
The Great Crowded Group Photograph in the Sky.
(The Tzedakah Photograph.)

8. “There’s No Such Thing As A Small Mitzvah.” (late 2021)

Nobody makes a greater mistake than he who does nothing because he could only do a little. (Edmund Burke)

At some point while preparing these Divray Torah, I recalled the following statement that I had made in my lectures and classes innumerable times: “There’s no such thing as a small Mitzvah.”

Just to give one example — “...no small Mitzvahs”, and what then resulted came in three stages:

(*Aleph*) Some time while **זיב/Ziv Tzedakah Fund** — the non-profit organization that I had founded was active — (1981-2008), I had asked my friend Arnie Draiman — our representative/agent in Israel for many years — to ask his contact at Jerusalem’s Meled

school for extremely-high-risk high school students (the dropouts, the future Losers of society) what the students needed. We had \$500, \$1,000, or more, available, and wanted to continue to provide support because the Mitzvah hero founder and principal, Dr. Menachem Gottesman, was accomplishing astounding results with these young men and women. When Arnie asked, the request was for two things, snacks in the kitchen and pencils.

It was the *pencils* that really tore at me – to think that there were students who came to school who couldn't even afford pencils to take notes! Though I had read about this kind of thing, I had *never* really considered that that might *really* be possible.

(2) Arnie's experience with the school stunned me. Later, I asked Arnie for a list of examples of inexpensive high-powered Mitzvahs. From his answers I wrote an essay "***What Possible Difference Could \$38.00, \$22.00, \$18.00 – Even \$2.66 – Make in Someone Else's Life?***", which I published in 2006 in my book *Giving Your Money Away*.

(3) **The \$2.66 Mitzvah:** For years, Ziv had supported Seattle Mitzvah hero Jeannie Jaybush's work with literally hundreds individuals and families experiencing the hardships of living in poverty. We asked Jeannie the same question about her "people":

In the recent past, she told us about the need for infant thermometers for families to have on hand at home. And then she told us a very sad story. A newborn child had been running a fever, but because the parents were illegal immigrants, they were afraid to take the infant to the emergency room. As time went on, it was clear that the child was suffering. When the visiting nurse arrived and examined the infant, the parents knew that they had to take the risk. By the time the emergency room doctors and nurses could take care of the child, it became clear that the child had meningitis, and, because of the long delay, had suffered permanent damage.

Ziv's Managing Director, Naomi Eisenberger, researched the costs and discovered that we could buy dozens at approximately \$3.50 apiece. Subsequently, a contact who remembered Jeannie's request for infant thermometers informed us that For \$2,000, Ziv could buy approximately 780 thermometers. After adding in \$75.00 for shipping, the unit price came to about \$2.66 apiece.

For \$2.66 a child could have avoided years of suffering and disability!

The system was broken both on the societal level – for not discovering this specific need, and on the individual Mitzvah-person level – for not having recognized this specific Tzedakah item and the opportunity to correct the situation.

Jeannie's story is nothing short of devastating, an unconscionable gap in Mitzvah-efforts. I think the poet Marge Piercy profoundly and *practically* expresses what *to do* when certain Mitzvah opportunities present themselves:

*What we want to change **we curse and then pick up a tool.****

Bless whatever you can with eyes and hands and tongue.

If you can't bless it, get ready to make it new.

Certain Mitzvah-solutions come about in two stages. Some individuals are so angry about, distressed, or shattered by a human problem that needs to be fixed, they curse (as I did when I heard Jeannie's story) at the appalling situation, and *then* with the additional emotional energy from their frustration and anger, they begin to set things right through their Mitzvah-response.

Some of my Mitzvah heroes founded their work in this manner.

You can read about them in my other Divray Torah.

**My emphasis.*

9. *Sometimes It Takes So Little
To Make Some People Happy**
Simple Happiness and Fun Mitzvahs

בְּן עֲזַאי אוֹמֵר ... שְׂמִינָה גוֹרֶרֶת מִצְוָה

Ben Azzai says: ...

One Mitzvah tugs another along with it. (Pirkay Avot 4:2)

If a picture is worth a thousand words, one act is worth a thousand pictures.

Tom Warson

I. The background

For 44 summers I had my ideal job. I was the Tzedakah/Mitzvahs Resource Person for the United Synagogue Youth (USY) Israel Pilgrimage. I was with each of the groups of teenagers for a day, and my “job” was to take them to meet Mitzvah heroes, do some hands-on Mitzvah-activities like picking hundreds of pounds of vegetables (our record was two tons of onions in an hour and a quarter. The produce would then be donated to soup kitchens and food pantries throughout the country. Once the USY’ers painted the apartment of a family that had survived a bus bombing. At the end of our day, I would spend an hour with them discussing what they had learned about Mitzvahs, and what they could do when they returned home to the United States and Canada. I also talked with them — often one-on-one — on the bus, during breaks, or walking from the bus to the Mitzvah-project.

Add to my “work”, I always sublet an apartment in Jerusalem for 6-8 weeks.

What more could I ever ask for?

A quick word about the USY’ers: Most were going into the twelfth grade, almost 100% of them were enthused (a moderate description) for their “Mitzvah day with Danny Siegel”. A sizable number had already accomplished significant Mitzvah-acts that repaired and restored the lives of others. Quite a few had Bat and Bar Mitzvah Mitzvah projects that were nothing short of spectacular.

During those 44 summers, I worked with between 10-15,000 teen-agers.

And by 2019, I could calculate that “my” oldest Pilgrims were in their early ’60’s, some of whom had sent their own children on Pilgrimage.

What more could I ask for?

In addition, most summers I had 1, 2, 3, or 4 Mitzvah-interns work with me. They were usually in college or graduate school, some of whom were former Pilgrims or staff members, and several are now rabbis, Jewish educators, professional or volunteer leaders in their synagogues and various agencies and organizations in their Jewish communities.

Several of us stay in touch, recalling those intense “Mitzvah days”. They update me on their **צדקה/Tzedakah** and **גמילות חסדים/Gemillut Chassadim activities** since they returned. In many instances, they have assumed the role of Mitzvah-teacher, with me their eager student.

What more could I want in Life?

*Sometimes It Takes So Little
To Make Some People Happy*

II. The question that led to this Dvar Torah

One summer I asked my interns if it was acceptable to spend Tzedakah money for

outside benches. I asked because:

(1) I thought of, frequently saw, and had walked up the steep hill of Jerusalem's Agron Street myself countless times. Below were hotels, restaurants, and the Mamilla Mall; above, the Supersol market and busy King George Street. Benches on Agron would allow not-so-strong or not-so-able people to make it up the hill because all along the way they would have places to rest.

(2) I had often strolled along the tree-lined promenade in **רחביה/Rehavia**, a neighborhood where large numbers of elderly people live. For that area of Jerusalem, I thought of additional benches because I had seen so many people on Shabbat afternoon just sitting outside and spending a few hours *schmoozing* with friends. A few more benches there would certainly add to the beautiful Shabbat atmosphere for more people.

For me, the main issue was, could I, or anyone, take from *always-limited* Tzedakah funds and use the money for "lesser" Mitzvahs, instead of, for example, food, safe houses for victims of domestic violence, computers for students stuck in virtual classrooms and no money for a computer and internet hook-up, or life-saving escape from oppression? I thought of the most striking example: The great sums of money in 1944 that The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee funneled to Raoul Wallenberg for his miraculous efforts saving Jews in Budapest from the Nazis.

By the end of a discussion on this serious issue, all my interns agreed that it was a Kosher use of Tzedakah money.

Since I found their comments reasonable, I began to consider more seriously simple happiness/fun Mitzvahs. Many everyday examples came rushing into my memories. I especially recalled when I bought a two-third-size soccer ball to give to young girls and plastic jumprobes for younger kids when I went on a Mitzvah-mission to Guatemala. A year later, when we saw one of the girls about age 8 or 9, she was excited to tell us that she was still enjoying the jump rope.

The Mitzvah-math — Soccer ball: \$8, jumprobes at The Dollar Store: \$1. Happiness/Fun/Long-Term Return on the investment, at the very least, 1,000%.

Thinking about the jumprope-and-soccer-ball-Mitzvahs, I began to consider a somewhat related topic: *Immediately-and-completely-solvable-problems* that Mitzvahs can manage. Reviewing my 40+ years distributing Tzedakah money from my **זיו/Ziv** non-profit organizations in the U.S. and Canada, I clearly saw a need for this kind of Mitzvah-activity. It was certainly not my exclusive approach. Nor am I denying by implication that there is an equal-if-not-greater-need to take on, wrestle with, and solve the larger, more all-encompassing problems, such as

- (I) writing articulate laws simultaneously protecting free speech
and preventing the plague-like spread of toxic lies
in the media and social media
- (II) discovering *the* absolute best and most convenient cure for COVID
- (III) eliminating all hackers and hacking *everywhere*
- (IV) educating, training, mentoring, rebbi-ing a generation of Mitzvah heroes
in a vast range of fields of endeavor
that would relieve senseless hunger, suffering,
and the unnecessary and preventable deaths of others.

That said, there *is* an important place and need for the "easy" Mitzvahs, ones that can be accomplished — (like paying a heating bill, repairing broken windows and door locks, buying pencils and soccer balls and jumprobes).

When you are finished, you can say, "Done!"

In fact, the immediacy and finality would no doubt significantly add enthusiasm and stamina to your Mitzvah-efforts.

**Even in the Grand Scheme of Things,
This is no small thing.**

Sometimes It Takes So Little To Make Some People Happy

III. Adam Ginchansky, “The Harry Potter Kid”

I admit it. I am one of the half-dozen people on the face of the earth who has not read any of the Harry Potter books. I wasn’t obstinately trying to buck the trend. I just wasn’t “into” that kind of story. But about four years ago, I became truly educated about Harry Potter at my friend Jan’s grandson Adam’s Bar Mitzvah.

Over many years I saw, read and heard about, Mitzvah centerpieces for tables at the *Oneg Shabbat*, *Kiddush*, or party, everything from sports equipment, to clothing, to laundry detergent — that a specific Wonder Child Bat Mitzvah “kid” bought with her own gift money a brand new industrial strength washing machine at a shelter for homeless people to replace the broken one.

At Adam’s event, every one of the Saturday night tables had the complete 8-volume set of Harry Potter books *in hardback* as a centerpiece, with a note stating that they were going to be donated to various schools that did not have the budget to buy them for their libraries. *And* after the family had recovered from the events of the *simcha*, Bar Mitzvah Adam made the rounds of many of the schools to personally donate the books.

The driver — his mother — was justifiably *very* proud.

As a result of what I had seen and learned, I was reminded of three important Mitzvah principles that day:

(A) There is no end to the Mitzvah-creativity of Bar and Bar Mitzvah “kids”.

(B) Sometimes the younger generation beats us “hands down” with ideas. They do amazing Mitzvah-projects — even though some parents may have said about their plans, “It can’t be done”.

(C) Adam Ginchansky, the “Harry Potter Kid” “got it”. He, like the others, has sometimes taught us a way to make Mitzvah dollars stretch further than we had imagined.

Again, the Mitzvah-math: Just like the soccer ball and jumprobes mentioned above, we can only imagine how many young people (and adults) will spend how many hours reading at least one of the volumes. It was a very wise investment, and a return on the money that would make any Wall Street pro envious.

Once I had seen the Harry Potter Bar Mitzvah Mitzvah Project, and heard of the delivery of the books, many related ideas came spilling out.

IV. Back to the Hebrew quote

In Ben Azzai’s phrase above — **שְׂמִצְוָה גּוֹרֶרֶת מִצְוָה / *Mitzvah goreret Mitzvah***, the Hebrew root **גרר** means to “pull”, “pull along”, “tow”, “drag”.* For example, in Israel you see the root on a bumper sticker on a car, truck, or van pulling something attached. The **גורר/gorer** is the vehicle doing the pulling the “tow-er”, and the **נגרר/nigrar** is the thing being towed (the “tow-ee”). In back might be a piece of earthmoving equipment on a flatbed which possibly weighs 5 or 10 times as much as the vehicle pulling it. That’s a good image for one Mitzvah pulling along another, isn’t it?

But there’s an even better, much more powerful image: When I looked up **גרר** in the dictionary this morning for a good translation, it listed a term I hadn’t known: **ספינת גרר / *sefinat gerar-a tugboat***. Now we can *really* understand Mitzvahs. Just picture two of those tiny tugboats pulling a mega-cruise ship into port! That’s the potentially enormous power of even an apparently minor Mitzvah to benefit others and to create an overall *menschlich* society.

V. The Logistics of using Tzedakah money for fun and Simple Happiness

Aleph: Easiest and absolutely essential to *always* keep in mind:

Sometimes It Takes So Little To Make Some People Happy

Bet: We should think about and research how simple happiness and fun Mitzvahs should be paid for wisely. This is no less important than knowing what kind of nutritious, yet tasty, foods a soup kitchen needs to serve or what model computer will satisfy all the needs of a sixth-grader.

Gimel: Painting: One summer my USY'ers painted the apartments of some elderly Russian Jewish immigrants. Another year, it was the home of a family that had survived a bus bombing. And a third occasion, on the recommendation of a social worker, painting the apartment of a family that simply couldn't afford to hire professional painters. Really now, how much did the paint and brushes cost? What was the loving look worth on the face of the woman whose apartment the teenagers had just transformed? One person wanted to pay us, but of course the kids refused. One woman insisted on giving a USY'er a watermelon. She just *had to* thank us somehow.

Dalet: I have a photograph showing a similar reaction: Five Israeli soldiers standing at their outpost are holding up a sign with a big heart, and in multi-colored large letters saying “**תודה רבה Stephanie**”, thanking her for the great quantity of pizza and soda she had paid for as her Bat Mitzvah Mitzvah project.

Hay: Birthday-party-Mitzvahs for children who otherwise wouldn't have one are also high on the list. Who can really know what lies latent in a child's emotional memory because all of his or her friends had parties, and he or she did not?

Vav: On the same order, I know a Jewish man who used to dress up as the Easter Bunny. It was his way to do his part to make kids happy.

Zayin — Joe the Butler: The greatest of all simple-happiness-Mitzvah doers: Joe Lejman of Gas City, Indiana, dressed in a tuxedo, borrowed fine china and crystal, and served as a butler for a day in a shelter for victims of domestic violence. All the women were given a bell. All they had to do was ring it, and their personal butler would come. To quote Lejman, “The ladies have such low self-esteem. Some of them have never felt special for any reason. During the course of the day, I was serving one of the clients coffee, and then lighted her cigarette, and she started crying. She said, ‘This is the first time I could ever cry because someone's been so nice to me.’”

Chet: The hard part, of course, is deciding what portion of a Tzedakah budget should be used for the “heavy Mitzvahs” and which for the “ostensibly-lightweight-but-possibly-incredibly-Big-Time” Mitzvahs.

VI: A Personal Reflection

I'm a latecomer to the happiness and fun aspect of Tzedakah and Mitzvahs. Looking back over the more than 40 years of having large sums of Ziv's Tzedakah money at my disposal, I wish I had become more aware of this aspect of Mitzvahs earlier on. My Mitzvah-horizons would have been much broader and more people would have benefited. I have no regrets for my past work, but looking to the future, I am grateful to Adam, the Harry Potter Bar Mitzvah Mitzvah Project Man, for helping me lay out my plans in the coming years.

Sometimes It Takes So Little To Make Some People Happy

VII: An Exceptional Example:

January, 2022, marks my sixtieth anniversary as a “road warrior”. Over those decades, I was invited to speak in hundreds of places on Mitzvahs, Tzedakah, and Jewish values including at JCC’s, Jewish and secular schools, universities, Hillels, Jewish Federations, and education conferences. Often they were week-ends, but sometimes they were “one-night stands”.

In 2006, Casting for Recovery (CfR) (castingforrecovery.org) held its 10th anniversary retreat. It was located at a modest-level resort in a remote area of Pennsylvania that in the past — as with many similar establishments and hotels, and resorts — did not accept Jews as guests (in the not-so-distant past).**

I had been invited to speak to this unique audience of mostly non-Jewish people on Shabbat afternoon about a Jewish-values perspective on CfR. That week-end stands out as one of the most powerful experiences in all my years of travel for Mitzvah-speaking.

CfR is for women who have or who have had breast cancer — even women who have been in remission more than 20 years. As I was told, “Any age, any stage”.

It was founded in 1996 by Gwenn Perkins, a professional flyfisher, and Dr. Benita Walton, a prominent breast reconstruction surgeon.

As a male, I obviously cannot conceive of what goes on in the mind of a woman who hears words like “a lump”, “stage four”, or “it’s back”. Sometime after the retreat, I read Siddhartha Mukherjee’s thick, thoroughly-researched book *The Emperor of All Maladies*, which documented the history of medical treatment (surgery, chemicals, radiation) from the beginning,

But, I realized that the author was dealing only with facts, with little about depression, fear, and loneliness, and the other psychological and human aspects of living with cancer. Something was missing, and Perkins and Dr. Walton came up with an amazingly creative solution. This is what CfR does:

- 1. CfR holds flyfishing retreats somewhere out in nature (sometimes “in the wilds”) throughout the country:**
- 2. There are 14 women at each one, plus female expert flyfishing instructors, some of whom are former participants.**
- 3. It’s free.**
- 4. In 1996, the founding year there were two retreats.**
5. Nowadays, there are about 55 retreats annually reaching approximately 700 women.
6. More than 10,000 women have benefited since CfR was founded.
7. Only women attend, though male River Helpers are allowed on Sunday.
8. Recently there were also three specially-focused retreats:
for women in the military,
for women under 40,
and for women who had been diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer.

Why flyfishing?***

*The exercise for certain muscles is physically beneficial,
the women are out in nature,*

(a better setting than in a hospital or group-therapy room setting),

flyfishing is absolutely different than

almost any of the woman had ever thought of doing —

this “jolt” is also a great psychological benefit,

the retreat is held either by a lake or a flowing stream

*far away from home,
the location itself being
psychologically (some say, “spiritually”) healing for the women,
flyfishing takes intense focus to learn casting skills,
and of course,
they are left alone
in their group or with their instructors
to share and unload and hug or say or laugh or cry
or do whatever they feel is necessary.*

There’s one more element – but I’m saving that for the end.

Among my many memories from that week-end more than 15 years ago there are two or three moments that I need to mention:

a. Some of the women become experts in the intricacies of tying their own lures. One morning, I remember innocently asking the women at my table at breakfast, “Suppose I was fishing for trout in Lake Michigan. Should I use Lure X? (*a type I had just learned about*). They looked at me, but without verbalizing it, I could see their playful response in their eyes, “Are you the dumbest male on God’s earth? Only an idiot would use that one!”

b. In one of CfR’s videos I had watched at some other time, a woman was heard shouting with exhilaration. When the camera panned upward, you see that what she thought was a fish was only her line caught in a branch. It was an amusing moment. *But* the woman *did not* think, “How stupid of me!” She was, after all, just having fun.

c. Sunday morning, one of the spouses took me to the stream outside the lodge to teach me some basics: Where to look for the fish, how to hold the rod, how to perform the delicate, lyrical sweep of the arm to cast the line. On the other side of the stream were two women maybe 4-5 feet apart, “doing their flyfishing thing”.

As I watched the women, I gained a new, deeper understanding of the Hebrew term **שלווה/shalva-peace of mind.**

It was a profoundly moving sight.*****

d. The only time I heard the word “cancer” was when another invited guest, a prominent reconstruction breast surgeon, gave a slide-show presentation on the latest surgical techniques. Cancer never came up in my conversations with the women or in public discussions at the sessions.

It’s *not* because the women were in denial or that they were suppressing thoughts of their cancer.

It was because everything that week-end could be summarized as,

“Life is not about cancer. It’s about living.”

All the answers to “Why flyfishing?” offered above, are of course good ones. My adult audiences cover them all in our discussions.

But it’s usually the teen-agers I work with who catch the “one more reason”:

It’s fun!

This was confirmed when I asked one of the CfR staff, “Do they laugh?”

“Only from the time they get there until they leave.”

**Someone once told me that Mitzvahs are like potato chips – you can’t just have one of them. Once you start, you just keep going.*

***One of the resort’s employees I was schmoozing with who had grown up in the area, when I said “No Jews allowed”, he added, “or Catholics”.*

**** (By the way, they throw the fish back.)*

***** Only half-jokingly, many of the women would have preferred to cancel the formal sessions and, instead, to be let loose out in the water or on the stream’s bank all week-end.*

10. DC3s, Cessnas, and Air Force One

Last week, when I went to pick up a prescription at CVS, my former mail carrier was there waiting in line for his flu shot. A few years ago, he had taken a different job at USPS. So I no longer had the opportunity for our occasional pleasant *schmooze* time. My mind jumped to “post office Mitzvahs”, and I thought about whoever it was in USPS who came up with a fabulous Mitzvah: If USPS were to ask everyone who receives mail on a specific day to leave one item of food for food banks and soup kitchens by the mailbox — just imagine the grand total of how many Americans would be reached, and how many beneficiaries would get relief from their struggle for food!

This is by far the most extensive Mitzvah-publicity I know.

It is truly a staggering Mitzvah-statistic.*

The Hebrew word for “imagination” is **דמיון/dimayon** from the root **דמה** meaning “similar”. Apples and oranges are similar because they are fruits; DC3s, Cessnas, and Air Force One are all planes, and Toyotas, Lamborghinis, and Hummers share “carness”. The power to categorize and sort is one of the brain’s incredible talents.

א. But what happened with that USPS person whose idea it was is this: He made a giant imaginative leap (**דמה**) beyond letters and packages with his Mitzvah-**דמיון/dimayon-imagination** to bring together things that are ostensibly dissimilar from “neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night...” to food-insecure Americans everywhere throughout the entire country, from Hawaii to Maine, Alaska to Florida.

That is Mitzvah-דמיון/dimayon-imagination.

It is finding this illogical, almost-unbelievable jump between two great mental distances, this stretch, jolt, really (until it makes sense) that often results in creative Mitzvahs.

ב. Next example: For several years at the Stanly Manor nursing home in Albemarle, NC, bikers (the real ones, not the week-end dentists and lawyers) visited, hung out with, and partied with the residents. (*Long story, for some other time.*) I spent a wonderful afternoon with this most unusual mixture of genuinely close friends. I think of two post cards: “Wish you were here!” and “A good time was had by all!”

ג. Next example: **Pit Bulls and Parolees** is an incredible program of rehabilitation matching parolees, and an often-abandoned or abused and misunderstood breed of dogs that are erroneously thought to be genetically vicious and terrifying. The parolees work with them, train them, and through them are (to use a hackneyed term) “rehabilitated”.

(www.animalplanet.com>tv-shows>pitbulls-and-parolees,)

(Also see the TV Series “Dogs of War”.)

There are numerous programs matching individuals with special needs with people-without-special-needs, e.g., many synagogue, church, and (either in groups or in pairs) youth group Mitzvah programs. But going beyond this basic idea, and using their **דמיון/imagination**,

ד. two young Israelis women **Jenna Elbaz** and **Shaked Karp**, founded **My Piece of the Puzzle** pairing children with special needs with similar-aged children at risk.

(https://mypieceofthepuzzle.wixsite.com/mpop)

If we think about these Mitzvah projects, others no longer seem so farfetched:

(1) **The Penguin Project**, which produces theatrical productions. All of the actors are persons with special needs (*penguinproject.org*);

(2) In Israel, **Kalman and Malki Samuels’ Shalva Band** is composed of musicians with special needs (*www.shalva.org*), and

(3) **The Special Stars** trains young women with special needs to be cheerleaders. (*specialstarsprogram.org*)

(4) And nowadays people don't think twice when they read, hear about, or participate in another Special Olympics event in their community.

(5) The same is true when they watch wheelchair tennis or basketball, or marathoners with prostheses or in customized wheelchairs.

(6) **Myriam Mendilow, ז"ל**, was a superb, and beloved former highschool teacher is **צפת/Tsfat**. When her husband took a position at Hebrew University, the family moved to Jerusalem. Once comfortably re-settled, She had become deeply disturbed by the common sight of old people begging in the streets. She kept thinking old/young, young/old and then acted on what had to be done. Her solution was to have the Elders learn bookbinding so that they could rebind the schoolbooks of young students. Mrs. Mendilow soon founded **יד לקשיש-Yad Lakashish-Life Line for the Old**. Over the years, **יד לקשיש-Yad Lakashish-Life Line for the Old** has expanded to more than a dozen workshops.

Mrs. Mendilow was my very first personal encounter with a Mitzvah hero. Meeting her set me on my quest for more than 45 years to find, meet, learn from, and work with them and many more Mitzvah heroes.

And this was my first personal experience witnessing **דמיון/dimayon-imagination** used for Mitzvahs.

(www.lifeline.org.il)

(7) **World-renowned Anita Shkedi**, founder of therapeutic horseback riding in Israel and distinguished (and rigorous) teacher of the instructors and trainers at the various centers throughout the country. It is a well-known anatomical and physiological fact that horses and human beings have the same stride in their walk. Her extraordinarily profound knowledge and insight about how a human being and a horse relate and communicate has justifiably gained her the reputation I described above. She provided solutions, for example: For a very broad range of people with physical, mental, and emotional challenges and disabilities. Her work kept expanding, to include: Soldiers with PTSD, survivors of terror attacks, residents of a nursing home, adults with special needs, individuals with certain stages of MS, and even persons with eating disorders.

(8) Many of Philadelphia's street people emerged from their desperate lives because the person reaching out to them was an 11-year-old kid — **Trevor Ferrell**. If you hadn't known about Trevor and saw a photograph of a group of street people and Trevor comfortably right in the middle, you'd think, "What is that child doing in this photo?" — unless, of course, you knew his story. If you did, the picture would seem quite natural.

I have many more examples of people who saw things with their **דמיון-מיתב/ dimayon-imagination** that we hadn't noticed or thought about. For those of you who read cookbook recipes or watch *The Iron Chef* or *Diners Drive-ins and Dives*, you may very well wonder about their use of **דמיון-imagination**, i.e., how the cooks and bakers come up with such strange combinations in their sauces, infusions, remoulade, and marinades — almost anything except hair conditioner or kerosene.

But cooks, bakers, and 3-star Michelin honcho chefs are only dealing with *food*.

The examples above are about *people*. The **Mendilows, Shkedis, Elbazes, Shaked, Trevors**, and others are the Mitzvah-teachers who ought to command our greater attention and train us to develop our own all-important **דמיון-leap to Mitzvah-imagination**.

**People who follow the Olympics will undoubtedly recall an analogy to the monumental degree of one achievement from the world of athletics. Many world records are set and gold medals awarded, their victory measured in hundredths of a second or fractions of an inch. In 1968, Bob Beamon made a long jump of 29 feet 2 1/2 inches, beating Jesse Owens' world record from 1935 by 21 3/4 inches. Beamon's unbelievable feat stood as the world record for another 23 years. At the time, some sports writers considered it the greatest physical feat ever.*

11. Why All Your Mitzvahs Should NOT Be Done Secretly

Sometime, somewhere in the course of Jewish history it seems that the idea spread among The Folk, that Mitzvahs — those acts we do for the benefits for others — must be done in secret.

That is certainly true for some Mitzvahs. An example would be:

1. You want to be certain that financially-vulnerable members of your synagogue might not be able to afford all the provisions for a *menschlich* Passover. The Talmud (*Pesachim 99b*) states that:

ולא יפחתו לו מארבע כוסות של יין

(Even a poor Jew) **should be provided with no less than four cups of wine.**

2. You want to do something for them, but you don't want them to know who you are, and you don't want to know which particular family is benefiting.

3. Solution: Donate to the Rabbi's discretionary fund for this purpose, and the Rabbi will make it happen. At the same time the recipients will preserve their anonymity.

However, except in a situation like the one above, anonymity is only #2 (הלכות עניים *Hilchot Matnot Ani'im-Gifts to Poor People 10:8*) on the Rambam's famous list of 8 levels of Tzedakah. (*Hilchot Matnot Ani'im-Gifts to Poor People 10:7-14*)

Higher still is #1 (*10:7*):

מעלה גדולה
שאין למעלה ממנה
זה המחזיק ביד ישראל שמך
ונותן לו מתנה
או הלואה
או עושה עמו שותפות
או ממציא לו מלאכה
כדי לחזק את ידו
עד שלא יצטרך לבריות לשאול

**A high level
of which there are none higher
is strengthening the hand of a Jew
who has become financially downtrodden
by giving the person a gift or a loan
or becoming a business partner or creating work for the person
so that that person will again have his hand strengthened
so that the person won't be so needy
that that person will have to ask (others for help).**

In brief, helping someone become self-sustaining and independent.*

If, for example, you are trying to help someone find a job, you simply cannot allow anonymity. You certainly have to know enough of the person's background, innate skills, training, and personality to make a proper match.

And however, where anonymity does not apply, by not talking about your Mitzvahs, you are possibly keeping others from joining you in your Mitzvah activities are preventing that many more people from benefiting. This is most certainly counterproductive and not the intent of Judaism's great stress and focus on Mitzvahs.

And however, here is a prime example of the need to talk about and share your Mitzvah activities:

A. Years ago, I was invited to present a series of talks at a week-end for a synagogue's board of directors. The leadership wanted to re-define the congregations's essence by focusing its program on Mitzvahs.

B. I was informed ahead of time that the present chairperson of the Mitzvah Committee was rather “low key”.

C. When I talked to her privately before my first presentation, she told me that she was a home healthcare nurse, and that she prepares 75 Thanksgiving meals on her own for the people she takes care of.

Let me state clearly: When she told me this, she was not bragging.

She was simply filling me in on one aspect of her work.

D. During one of my presentations, when I informed the board members, not a single one of them was aware of this fact. They were troubled by not having known about this Thanksgiving Mitzvah. I know that had I asked, several of them most certainly would have offered to help by preparing some of the food, including their special, secret divine recipe for turkey stuffing or legendary pumpkin pie.

And furthermore - A special note for families: A recent study proved that parents not only have to *model* their Mitzvahs to their children *by their actions*, but they have to also *talk to them* about what they do. This verbal sharing also obviously applies to talking with other individuals beyond the family circle.

My friend Rabbi Jonathan Porath pointed out to me that in the **שמע/Shema** when it speaks of **לְבַנְיָךְ וְלְשִׁנְיָתְךָ/veshinantam levancha-teach the words to your children**, the next two words explain the method: **וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָּם/vedibarta bam**-you must transmit the words orally, articulating your thoughts verbally, so that they can hear Torah *through your voice*.

In all situations, people talking about their Mitzvahs are *not* bragging. They are only sharing what they do in the hope that others will learn about new opportunities to do Mitzvahs or/and join them in the Mitzvah work.

I hope this has clarified a point that has been misunderstood about our Jewish tradition, since the dignity, wellbeing, and sometimes even the very lives of so many people are at stake.

**A good parallel might be drawn to recent efforts to market and purchase sustainable food items, and to buy from local merchants for the many benefits these practices will provide for the community.*

12. From Hacky Sacks To Kippot On The Importance Of Always Thinking Mitzvahs

(Aleph) In Guatemala’s Western Highlands, Mayan women are crocheting kippot:

How did it happen that more than 60 indigenous Mayan women in Guatemala are producing hundreds, thousands of Fair Trade colorful *kippot*, two are weaving *Tallitot*, other artisans are making colorful scarves just waiting to be transformed into *Tallitot*, and still others are making beautiful *challah covers*, *Mezuzah covers*, and other Jewish items?*

I have traveled to Guatemala five times with **MayaWorks (mayaworks.org)** to see them with my own eyes and to witness the reality behind this surreal picture I had heard about.

The secret — though there is really no secret to it — has a brief, yet startling, history. One year, long before I began to join Mayaworks on their trips to Guatemala, a certain participant, Becky Berman, saw that the women were making hacky sacks with brightly-colored crocheted covers. This convenient at-home work constituted a significant source of income for their families.

A: As I picture it, Becky said only one sentence, “**Maybe they can make kippot.**”

B: Once the women were taught how to make them — the rest is history.

C: The woman’s dignity and self-image in the family and community rose greatly.

D: They feed their families so much better.

E: And — this being a *macho* country where girls' education beyond a few grades is not a cultural priority — the income from the sales of *kippot* helps keep their daughters in school. They are hard working students. Their deep commitment to their studies gives them hope for a better future and a more fulfilling life. Now so many of them are benefiting.

Some of the most moving moments of my trips have been listening to these girls and young woman, some as young as eight or nine, as they described their plans for “when they grow up”. Their plans include, becoming social workers, nurses, teachers, working in the tourist industry, and doctors.

But the essence of my telling this story is that Becky's words were an absolutely *Mitzvah-tour de force*. Connecting the dots from hacky sack to *kippot* is quite a mental leap.

However, I believe that the “message” is obvious: If we only take some time and train our minds to “think Mitzvahs”, who knows what might be the result?

And on another issue of no lesser importance is that the *kippot* comply with the rules of Fair Trade, which means among other things: **#A** They are paid a fair wage. In fact, the women were asked what *they* considered a fair wage for their labor. **#B** The work environment is obviously appropriate and comfortable — they work at home.

To summarize: Aside from the beauty of the women artisans' handiwork, what makes their products so special? First, the entire process embodies **צדקה/Tzedakah**, with no hint of the occasional connotation of “charity” as a “hand-out”. It is a perfect example of Maimonides' highest level of **צדקה/Tzedakah** — providing a way for people to be self-sustaining. And second, the Fair Trade element is a prime example from the highlands of Guatemala of **צדק/Tzedek**, Justice and fair practice for the benefit of individuals.

We should consider these two elements the next time we wear one of the Mayan womens' *kippot* and *tallitot*.

(Bet) The Technique: I want to give some examples of a simple technique:

(1) Stand in front of a hotel, look at it for a few moments, and ask yourself how it could be used for Mitzvahs: **(Hotel Mitzvah #1) Naomi Berman-Potash's Project Debby** gets hotels to offer unoccupied rooms for free to victims of domestic violence if the shelters are full, i.e., a “hotel-Mitzvah”. **(Projectdebby.org)** **(Hotel Mitzvah #2): Syd Mandelbaum's Rock and Wrap it Up** gets hotels to donate leftover food to shelters and soup kitchens. **

(2) Projects with dogs engaged in Mitzvah activities keep expanding. **(Dog Mitzvah #1)** A recent article described the successes of dogs working with soldiers with PTSD, **(Dog Mitzvah #2)** a TV program showed pitbulls matched with ex-prisoners. (www.animalplanet.com > tv-shows > pitbulls-and-parolees) Also **(Dog Mitzvah #3) Paws of War** matching veterans with shelter dogs. (pawsofwar.org)

Just 3 or 4 more:

(3) The next time you take out your cellphone to answer, make a call, or send a text, remember that deactivated cellphones still dial 911, for free. So if you upgraded and didn't know what to do with the old one, you can donate it to women in shelters for survivors of domestic violence. Note: Not every one of these women owns a cellphone. So there is still a need for yours.

Often you can give it to the local sheriff's office. In many communities, the sheriff is connected to the shelters and will distribute yours appropriately.

(4) Gently-used stuffed animals from your children's earliest years can be given to **(Stuffed Animal Mitzvah #1)** police, fire fighters, and rescue squads to keep in their vehicles or **(Stuffed Animal Mitzvah #2)** to children living in a shelter for homeless families, and **(Stuffed Animal Mitzvah #3)** most recently, for refugee children in Texas (My friend **Rabbi Claudio Kogan**, when he was in McAllen, Texas, distributed boxes full of them sent from around the country. The photographs of the happy children are nothing short of awesome.) — And for that matter **(Stuffed Animal Mitzvah #4)** to those refugee children who have come

to these shores tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse from wherever they have fled, (*Stuffed Animal Mitzvah #5*) on every trip to Israel, Gerry Engelhart brings a *suitcase* full of stuffed animals (and extra boxes of them that wouldn't fit in the suitcase, to give to Arnie Draiman, the man with the Mitzvah connections, to distribute through his network of Mitzvah heroes, social workers, teachers, etc., to children who really could use these items of comfort and friendship.

(5) Creative use of cameras for Mitzvahs: — (*Camera Mitzvah #1*) The distinguished photographer **Bill Aron's** *New Beginnings, The Triumphs of 120 Cancer Survivors* contains moving photographs and brief stories about the people who experienced cancer. Aron's book will most certainly have a positive impact on individuals who are presently struggling with the disease. Also, (*Camera Mitzvah #2*) I once read a story about a photographer who was documenting the life of children living in shelters. Of course, he was the one taking the pictures. But one day, he handed the camera to the children to see what *they* would choose to focus. This exposed him to an entirely different vision of their lives.

(6) From the enormous number examples of Bar and Bat Mitzvah Mitzvah projects over the past 30+ years, we see, and learn from their personal use of **דמיון-dimayon** just how rich Mitzvah-imagination is and how far we can extend our own thinking and actions for the benefit of others.

(*Gimel*) **The possibilities:** By the strict mathematical definition of "infinite", the possibilities may not be infinite, but the number in the stream of ideas-turned-Mitzvah-actions is extremely high indeed.

(*Dalet*) **In conclusion:** It seems to me that the late Becky Berman, — and our glorious Bat and Bar Mitzvah "kids" — (mentioned elsewhere in this anthology) are our Supreme Teachers about Mitzvah-creativity. They set precedents that can move us to recognize a wider spectrum of possibilities and may encourage and guide us to more and more varied Mitzvah-action.

As for the recipients: How many will benefit? I leave those calculations to researchers, demographic experts, and statisticians to calculate.

But, beyond a doubt, we can be certain that the number will be staggering and beneficial for everyone's body and soul.

**Since the Inquisition happened not only in Spain and Portugal but also in many places in Central and South America, I had briefly thought that these women might be descendants of conversos. But I dismissed this idea because that are indigenous Mayans — not of Spanish descent. A significant percentage do not speak Spanish, but only the particular Mayan language for their group. The groups of artisan women we met spoke two of the 21 languages — k'iche' and kaqchikel.*

***This is only one very small portion of the food rescue work Mandelbaum is doing. His Mitzvah work started backstage at rock concerts to rescue the leftover food from the elaborate buffet laid out for the stars and crew. Thus the name of his project — Rock and Wrap it Up.*

13. My Principles of Tzedakah and Mitzvahs

1. There are three essential elements in my approach to creating a more *menschlich* world through Mitzvahs: (a) Mitzvah heroes, (b) Jewish texts, and (c) *doing* acts of **צדקה/Tzedakah** with a portion of our money, and our time, energy, and physical efforts for **חסדים/Gemillut Chassadim-acts of caring, loving kindness.**

I believe it is very important to study, think about, and discuss the fact that Jewish tradition created two distinctly separate Mitzvah methods and means for doing good: צדקה/Tzedakah and חסדים/Gemillut Chassadim.

2. My writings illustrate how these three elements interact in different combinations

at different times, in different situations, with different ones taking precedence — everything adjusted depending on the specific circumstances. But always for the ultimate benefit of the recipient.

3. Mitzvah heroes are everywhere — every age (the ones I have met range from age 7 to 98), every body shape (endomorph, mesomorph, or ectomorph), NBA-star tall to third-grader short, articulate or not, frumpy or dandy, physically gorgeous or totally nondescript.

4. Mitzvah heroes are experts and they our best Mitzvah teachers. Their area of specialization is Life.

5. The study of Jewish texts broadens and deepens our understanding of the all-important terms “צדקה/Tzedakah”, “גמילות חסדים/Gemillut Chassadim”, “מצוות/Mitzvahs”, and “כבוד/Kavod-dignity”.

6. In Jewish tradition, it's *not* the thought that counts, it's the doing, the action, that changes lives. While strategies, long-range planning, and theories about the nature and structure of a just society are crucial Mitzvah-subjects to study in depth, ultimately it all comes down to *doing*. I always stress

“in the meantime”

i.e., while the details of the strategic and long-range plans are being worked out, something has to be done *now*.

7. Philosophizing about Mitzvahs *never* takes the place of acts of Tzedakah and Gemillut Chassadim. *Occasionally*, too much thought, research, and planning can even be counterproductive.

8. Oxymoron though it seems, Jewish tradition *requires* us to care for others by giving of our money and time.

9. There is still abundant room for חלוצינות/*chalutzit-pioneering* everywhere. If it is your nature to be a pioneer, look for opportunities to break new Mitzvah-ground. Innovation and radical change in Mitzvah-activities can occur no less radically than it has in the world of medicine, computers, and space travel.

10. *If there, then here*: A high percentage of our Mitzvah heroes' programs are replicable. If you like what others are already doing, learn from them how to do it in your own community adapting, of course, for your local needs.

11. *בל תשחית/bal tashchit-senseless waste* also applies most definitely to Tzedakah money. Jewish tradition requires us to distribute our personal Tzedakah money judiciously. If we are giving to a non-profit organization or institution, we are required to do careful research about the recipient no less than when we buy a refrigerator, recliner, washing machine, or SUV.

12. There is no such thing as a “small” donation. If we do the appropriate research, every dollar, every penny, can make a difference.

13. Mitzvahs — doing good for others and thereby making a more *Menschlich* world — is *not* all of Judaism. Among the fundamental elements are: Torah study, ritual, Hebrew, community, Jewish history, and the centrality of Israel in our personal lives (to name a few), are no less fundamental elements of what it means to be a Jew.

14. My emphasis has always been on *personalized* צדקה/Tzedakah and גמילות חסדים/Gemillut Chassadim.

15. Human quality-of-Life and the condition of the world do *not* remain the same throughout history. Today's sum-total of The Bad Things In The World need not exist tomorrow. Just consider one example: How much the world and life changed when World War II was over.

16. Every individual (often in partnership with others) has much greater power to change the lives of others for the better than he or she previously ever thought possible.

17. It is possible that there *may* be an intimate connection between Mitzvahs and meaning-in-Life and between Mitzvahs and personal happiness. I once discussed a

Talmudic text (*Sukkah 52a*) with Mitzvah hero HAMA's Avshalom Beni. He interpreted the following words in a very broad sense:

אורחין רחיקא
וצוותין בסימא

“Our life’s long road [through Mitzvahs] has been pleasant because we do it together.”

I found this relevant, very appealing, profound, and eminently teachable.

18. *We may discover new talents in ourselves, a greater personal depth, and new or renewed good feelings about ourselves* when we individually engage in Mitzvahs with a Mitzvah hero, or with a Mitzvah-*הברה/chevra*.

19. Though donors reap many benefits — among them good feelings, peace of mind, Life-perspective, and a sense of personal and human accomplishment, I must take issue with a statement by the great Talmudic sage, Rabbi Yehoshua (*Leviticus Rabba [Margoliot Edition] 34:8*):

תני בשׁ ר׳ יהושע יותר ממה שבעל הבית עושה עם העני העני עושה עם בעל הבית

It was taught in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua:

The poor person [standing at the door]

does more for the householder

than the householder does for the poor person

(who is experiencing the oppressive burdens of living in poverty).

With all due deference to Rabbi Yehoshua, in my opinion, the recipient of our Tzedakah money *always* benefits more.

Consider:

A. Buying an infant carseat and donating it to a family that cannot afford one.

B. And consider: My late father’s classmate who graduated from the Philadelphia College of Osteopathy class of 1940. He became a doctor because some rich person (I think unknown to the student) “just wanted to put someone through medical school”.

C. And consider: That stuffed tiger given to a lonely child, a \$1.00 plastic jumprope from the Dollar Store, or non-regulation 2/3-size soccer ball.

D. And fuel for Angel Pilots who fly patients for critical treatments from remote areas to smaller, uncongested airports close to medical facilities .

E. And consider: The tire you bought in order to replace a flat on someone’s car. He or she works in Los Angeles [Translation: The City of Automobiles], and they really can’t get anywhere without a car — especially to work — or have a sustainable income.

20. The same is true for **Gemillut Chassadim**. Consider: The coat that has been just hanging in the closet unworn for years — that coat that you remembered to bring with you to Louisiana and gave to someone whose home was swept away in Hurricane Katrina and who was so cold the person’s appearance tore your heart out. The remembering, the packing of the suitcase, the flights, and, not meaning to be cutesy, *shlepping* it on the plane are all elements of **Gemillut Chassadim**.

21. As I have said, and written many times — not the least important is:

It’s all right to feel good about your Mitzvah work.

It releases more endorphins and provides greater stamina and vigor to continue in your holy endeavors.

1 + 1 = 3: The Mathematics of Mitzvahs

I. A lesson in “The New Math”

More than 20 years ago, my good friend Rabbi Marc Sternfeld, once said to me, “**1 + 1 = 3 for very high values of 1.**” I cannot recall why or in what context he even said it, or whether it was it just meant as a funny line.

I briefly thought, “Marc knows far more mathematics than I do. Maybe this might be possible in some other advanced number system that I don't understand.”

But I inevitably returned to “**1**” is just a digit; It always has the same value.

Then, as I began to think more about **1 + 1 = 3**, things changed.

I thought:

But, a human being is more than just bones, blood, nerves, and hormones — **always more than just a 1.** Verse 6 in Psalm 8 expresses it most beautifully and memorably:

וַתַּחַסְרֵהוּ מְעַט מֵאַלְהִים

You have made human beings only a little lower than the angels

I concluded that the **1 + 1** is when one person (**a more-than-“1”**) is connected with another (**more than 1**) person, already there you have **two high values of “1”**. In addition, if they are connected by the high value of the Mitzvahs of **צדקה/Tzedakah** and **גְּמִילוּת הַחַסְדִּים/Gemillut Chassadim** — this certainly brings the total to a **3rd “1”**. Indeed, the very Mitzvah act adds greatly to **their already high values of “1”**.

So, either the truly joyous, amazing, radiant Mitzvah-act itself is **the third 1**, or the interaction of the two high value **1 + 1** persons plus the the Mitzvah raises the value of both even more, as in *the phrase*, “*She really exceeded herself*”, **the total would then be (at least) 3.**

II. In an attempt to grasp the greater implications of Mitzvahs/doing good

The only way I could get a better understanding of this somewhat ethereal, abstract — yet profound and potentially highly-charged — concept was by drawing *analogies*, even if just arriving at it piece by piece. Below is a small list of examples of *comparisons* that address the Mitzvah-act, the energy generated, and the subsequent result, or combinations of these aspects of what happens by doing good by Mitzvahs.

Hopefully one or more of these will resonate with you and will help bring “Mitzvah” more sharply into focus.

Jewish moments: November 29, 1947 — *the UN vote on the partition of Palestine*; May 14, 1948 — *the Creation of the State of Israel*; *a survivor of the Shoah at the ceremony or becoming an American citizen*; *the sound of the glass being crushed under the groom's or bride's foot, followed by a few seconds of silence, then the loud “Mazal Tovs”*; *emerging from a מקווה/mikvah in the final step in conversion*; *lighting Shabbat candles and feeling the release of stress, with heart, blood pressure, and blood sugar returning to healthy numbers*; *experiencing a deep moment of כוונה/kavvanah-uplift while singing כל נדרי Kol Nidray along with the cantor,*

embarking on a Mitzvah: (A) *Turning on a light switch*, (B) *turning the ignition on in the car*, and (C) *a pilot firing up the surge and noise of a gigantic 747's engines*, [It would not be inappropriate to say “Voila!” at moments of (A), (B), or (C).]

verbal stimuli providing radical responses: (a) *A jury announcing a just verdict of “innocent”*; (b) *a doctor saying “benign” to an anxious patient*:

famous people: *The moment Isaac Stern's bow touches the strings, and the first note of Mozart's Violin Concerto in D begins to transport the audience*; *Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary on reaching the summit of Everest*;

miscellaneous: *A jogger's “high”*; *the first jolt of caffeine*; *Archimedes' “Eureka”*; *the first kiss*; *gently kicking the flanks of a 1,200 pound horse that sets its huge body in motion*; *lighting a small candle in a pitch-dark room*; *the colors, designs, whistles and*

explosive sounds of an elaborate fireworks celebration; Boy Scouts' and Girl Scouts' first sparks from rubbing two sticks together.

III. Einstein

To analogize between Einstein's $E = mc^2$ and Mitzvahs strains the mind to the limit. After a while, you may be able to begin to digest the fact that energy (E) and mass (m) are essentially equivalent. But it is the (c) and the 2 that are unfathomable. c , the speed of light (186,282 miles per second) — and then squared, is so enormous that it is incomprehensible to us “regular” folk. Only physicists and astronomers can make sense of it and find it meaningful and useful.

I have said and written many times that no matter how “small” the Mitzvah, *you just never know* how great might be the result of that single act. I cannot think of any historical Mitzvah-event that would even approach a comparison with the transformative power explained in Einstein's breakthrough.

But despite the sheer enormity of $E = mc^2$, it can still serve as a reminder that: What may appear minuscule in a single act of doing good, really has tremendous latent power just waiting to emerge anywhere and at any time.

14. If You Are Planting, And You Are Informed That the משיח/Mashiach Has Arrived

With the help of my friend, Rabbi Jonathan Porath

I. One of my favorite Midrashic statements (Avot deRabbi Natan B, Chapter 31):

אם היתה נטיעה בתוך ידך
ויאמרו לך
הרי לך משיח
בוא ונטע את הנטיעה
ואח"כ צא
והקבילו

**If you are planting something that is right there in your hand
and they say to you,
“The משיח/Mashiach is here —
go plant,
and after you plant,
go and greet the משיח/Mashiach.**

The text is brief, and one that generates fine — often deep — discussions, and, on the surface, is easy to understand. I *did* “get” it, the meaning, the Life-lesson. But then, and with the help of friends, I realized that there were still many details to focus on and questions to answer, some of which might expand and deepen the meaning.

II. Questions and Details

1. Who is planting?

You, an experienced plant enthusiast who is completely focused, so that you would be certain it was placed correctly in the exactly-right soil?

You, a first-timer, who has been planning this since last night, or for a long time, in an attempt to expand your personal horizons?

You, remembering from elementary school a carrot top that you planted in

water and witnessed, fascinated, a green sprout grow longer and higher?

You want to be close to the earth and watch things grow — with all the awesome implications that come from putting a seed in the ground?

You, a busy person who just wanted to get this off the long list of “things to do” that day.

However we picture the scene, the words are unmistakably *addressed to you*.

2. The plant:

A succulent placed 100 yards *beyond* your desert back yard, imitating the pioneers reclaiming the Negev?

Daffodils or crocuses — first to bloom and harbingers of spring — for your mildly depressed soul that needs them to regain a personal feeling of hope, to somehow counteract the constant flood of discouraging news in the media.

A puny cedar sapling which will some day become a mighty presence, dwarfing a human even a Goliath or Og, Giant King of Bashan?*

3. The setting:

The back yard?

A huge vista — what you are planting
will add the perfect touch to the view?

The kitchen windowsill?

The boonies a few miles from Nowhere?

A vacant lot behind a New York high rise?

The only clear detail in the text is that whatever is being planted is almost in the soil *because it is right there in your hand*.

4. When?

First thing in the morning to give meaning to your day?

During a much-needed break from piecing together the details for a lawsuit
pitting one corporation against another that's been dragging on for years?

You were just waking up from a nap or snack or getting up from watching
the fourth segment of an 8-part series about notorious drug lords.

5. Who are “they” that bring you the report?

A group of strangers that had just happened by?

Two people?

A crowd?

People who saw the **משיח/Mashiach**

and are running around telling everyone that they find
that they should drop everything
and experience this unforgettable, cosmic event.

6. The meaning of **הרי-haray:** It's meaning is undisputed. It means “!” But does the phrase “**הרי לך-haray lecha**” mean “**There's the משיח/Mashiach!**” (possibly nearby) or “**The משיח/Mashiach is right here** (in front of your eyes)!”

7. The big questions:

“**Why you**”

and why — after hundreds of years of waiting for the **משיח/Mashiach** —

“**Why now?**”

In my opinion — as mentioned above — the essential larger meaning is relatively easy to grasp: Don't rush so quickly when people tell you that they've seen the **משיח/Mashiach**. While I am not completely jaded about the **משיח/Mashiach's** appearance, we've heard that message throughout our history, including contemporary times: Shabbetai Tzvi and the other false messiahs, Communism, assorted contemporary gurus and demagogues, Freud, or the love love love slogan of the hippies of the '60's.

So just keep doing what you are doing. i.e.. your part in repairing your part of the

world through your personal Mitzvahs, even though it appears that there is some quick fix happening.

You (me) — not anyone else.

I would also consider another interpretation of this Midrash: This text presents two different approaches to making the world a more *menschlich* place, by which I mean, when there will be no more inexplicable catastrophes, injustice, suffering, wars, or senseless, disastrous gaps in understanding about how Life is supposed to be good:

(א) By a miraculous and sudden act of God, or

(ב) by human actions — even the most seemingly insignificant ones — accumulating and moving the world slowly and deliberately toward the ultimate readjustment to Life's pristine harmony.

In a way, I think that there is something symbolic-yet-real here.

It may very well be that you will see your modest act of planting as planting a new **עץ חיים/Etz Chaim-Tree of Life**.

**When I planted my sapling on the 1961 United Synagogue Israel Pilgrimage mine looked so fragile that we joked that a cat could accidentally step on it and kill it. Now, more than 60 years later, I go to "visit" my tree. I always have to crane my neck to look way up at its magnificent green top framed by the blue of Heaven.*

The Tree and the Mashiach

(Avot de Rabbi Natan B, Chapter 31)

"If you are planting a tree,
and someone comes and says,
'The Mashiach is coming!' —
then plant!"

No matter what reasonable people
or foaming enthusiastic youths tell you:
this mashiach or that mashiach
is imminent —
plant!
The Mashiach is in no rush.
When you have patted down the last clods of dirt,
and watered your maple, your sycamore,
your elm,
he will still be wherever he is supposed to be,
and more than happy to admire the sapling with you.
Messiahs don't come to uproot things.
If he wanted to,
he could bundle Eretz Yisrael into a package
and bring it to you,
so you would not have to go wandering again
through many lands.
If he really is the Mashiach,
this One everyone pesters you about,
he can bring you Abraham,
who will sit by your tree
and dispense dates
and the flat bread of hospitality,
as in ancient days.
So plant it now, firmly, water it well,
whether or not there is a mashiach
today or tomorrow.

A Rebbi's Proverb

(From the Yiddish)

If you always assume
the person sitting next to you
is the Messiah
waiting for some simple human kindness —

You will soon come to weigh your words
and watch your hands.

And if the person chooses
not to be revealed
in your time —

It will not matter.

15. The Benefits Of Doing Mitzvahs With Your Personal Effort, a Percentage of Your Money, Or a combination of Both

(Aleph) Introduction:

Rabbi Yehoshua, a First Century sage and teacher of the great Rabbi Akiva, made the following surprising statement (*Leviticus Rabba [Margoliot Edition] 34:8*):

תני בש' ר' יהושע יותר ממה שבעל הבית עושה עם העני עושה עם בעל הבית

It was taught in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua:

The poor person [standing at the door]

does more for the householder

than the householder does for the poor person

(who is experiencing the the very real oppressive burdens of living in poverty).

It would seem natural to link this directly to a verse in *Proverbs 11:17*:

גַּמְלַל נַפְשׁוֹ
אִישׁ חֶקְדָּד

**A Chessed-caring/compassionate-person
benefits himself or herself.**

(Bet) Exploring the benefits of doing mitzvahs

In my talks, I often ask the audience or students, *“How do you feel when you are doing Mitzvahs?”* Almost always the answer is, *“I feel good”*, and very often that is where the discussion stalls. So, in an effort to examine more deeply the emotional and psychological effect on the **איש חסד** as a result of engaging in Mitzvahs, I assembled whatever came to mind, and then asked a number of friends to supplement my list.

These are the results:

- I. You feel good, of course — as a *result* of the Mitzvah, of course,
though it is not your primary reason for doing it,
 - IA. Feel happy
 - i. Try to articulate how this good feeling is different from

moments of success like

getting a dream job, or

your lab results bode well for your future,

buying the latest model of a fabulous personal computer, or

completing a project you have worked on for months

ii. *It's all right to feel good about doing Mitzvahs*

iii. It's not just an “ego-trip” or emotional high if done right, i.e.,
completely done for the benefit of others

iv. Even if you do it *only* for your own spiritual or emotional “high”,

a. That's still all right because

b. The beneficiary still benefits and

c. *That's what a Mitzvah is: the act that benefits others.*

d. Furthermore, the Talmud (*Pesachim 50b*) states that:

Even if the Mitzvah is

שלא לשמה

shelo lishma-not done for its own sake,

the person doing the Mitzvah

בא לשמה

ba lishma-may come to do it for its own sake

- e. On Maimonides' famous scale of the 8 levels of performing the Mitzvah of Tzedakah (*Hilchot Matnot Ani'im-Gifts to Poor People 10:14*), the last one reads:

פחות מזה שיתן לו

The [eighth], still lower, degree is when the person gives to the poor person

בעצב

be'etzev-grudgingly/painfully/unhappily.

My comment: ***It is still Tzedakah.***

This is similar to the line,

"What do you call a doctor who graduated at the bottom of her or his class?" – "Doctor."

IB. Feel grateful

IC. Feel blessed

- a.*** You have an awesome personal feeling that it is good to be alive and are blessed with this ability to do good
- b.*** In addition, it often happens that the recipient says to you, "God bless you" so that you not only "feel" blessed, but you *are* blessed by that other person.

ID. Feel fulfilled - as a Jew and a human being

IE. Feel rejuvenated and your very Life's vitality increases

IF. Feel whole

IG. Feel purposeful and *useful*

IH. Feel that your soul has been invigorated

II. Feel competent

IJ. Feel a sense of uplift, possibly even sublimity

IK. Simultaneously, you may feel a sense of humility that you have been given this power to play a significant role in making the lives of other human beings better and, as a result, changing the sum-total of good in the world

IL. And a deep sense of gratitude for the blessings that are a part of your own life.

IM. Feel a sense of **שלום/*shalom*-peace, completeness, wholeness, and שלווה/*shalva*-peace-of-mind.**

IN. Standing back, you feel *amazed* that you can actually touch other human souls

IO. Being engaged in front-line Mitzvahs, may open you up to discovering and focusing additionally on society-wide and global problems and subsequently motivate you to work towards greater all-encompassing solutions through letter writing, social, and other media, personal conversations, connections, and influence, rallies, protests, signing petitions, joining and/or founding movements, lobbying, and voting.

IP. Mitzvahs help clarify a sense of Life's priorities

- 1Q.** You *just know* you can make a *real* difference
- 1R.** For shy persons,
it is a positive, gentle, and non-threatening way
to have contact with others who will also definitely benefit
- 1S.** Yourself, having been a beneficiary at least once,
might possibly allow you,
to graciously accept being on the receiving end of Mitzvahs
- II.** **2A.** Proves that you *can* do something,
instead of being passive and frustrated by your passivity
- 2B.** Proves that you can *do* something
rather than doing nothing
- 2C.** Proves that you can do *something*,
reminding you that
anything helps
- 2D.** You learn quickly that doing *something* means
that there really is
no such thing as a small Mitzvah
- 2E.** Most likely you rarely —
almost never —
will doubt
that you have done something worthwhile
- III.** You will have a healthy, solid self-image
- 3A.** You learn more about yourself
by what you learn by being (beside through books)
“in the thick of life”
- 3B.** ***You know that you are SOMEBODY***
- 3C.** You can be somebody greater than “just yourself”
- 3D.** When you are engaged in Mitzvahs, ***you are really your Best Self***
- 3E.** You may get to like yourself or like yourself more —
something particularly relevant for teenagers
who are going through the natural process
of developing their self-image
- IV.** Gets you to think about “other things” in Life
Beyond the narrow confines of your routine
- V.** Rewarding —
You begin to redefine “rewards”, and
refine your personal sense of which rewards
are most personally meaningful.
- VI.** You have a sense of connection, and
if you believe in the “butterfly effect” from high school science,
then the connection you make through Mitzvahs
will connect to everyone and everything else in the world,
and *The Good and The Good People*.
NO ONE DOING MITZVAHS DIES OF LONELINESS.
- 6A.** Pay close attention to the word **גומל/gomayl**.
One of its many connotations is recompense/repay
(but obviously not in a monetary sense)
- 6B.** Being cognizant of how much other people
have done for us during our lives,
it only seems right (**צדק/Tzedek**)
that we should do the same for other people.
- VII.** Establishing a legacy and reputation

- 7A. You may become the pioneer of a **חברה/chevra-group** of caring, Mitzvah-oriented people
- 7B. Or you may be welcomed into an already-established caring community, a **Mitzvah-חברה/chevra**.
- 7C. You *really* get to appreciate *really* Good People
- 7D. You will no doubt seek out, associate with, and learn from Mitzvah heroes, The Mitzvah Greats

VIII. You will become educated about, and possibly enamored of, the reality and effectiveness of “paying it forward”, i.e. your response to a Mitzvah others have done for your benefit by doing for others may very well start a chain reaction of Mitzvahs, some of which may far exceed your own actions.

IX. **תציל ממוֹת וצדקה**/Tzedakah saves from Death (Proverbs 10:2 and 11:4)

9A. At the very least, your Mitzvah-act sometimes saves recipients from actually dying for no justifiable reason or “before their time”.

9B. The following (*Pesachim 8a-b*) is examined in detail in a separate Dvar Torah (#28 - “An Astonishing And Difficult Jewish Text”). However, in the present context, yet another interpretation might be possible:

האומר סלע זו לצדקה
בשביל שיחיה בני
או שאהיה בן העולם
הבא הרי זה צדיק גמור

If a person says, “I am giving this coin (money) to Tzedakah so that my child שיחיה/should live/be well/recover/survive) or that I should be allowed into the Next World – that person is a **צדיק גמור/Tzaddik Gamur**-complete Tzaddik.

Or as some texts read:

“I am giving this coin to Tzedakah so that my child may be healed/be well/will recover, survive – that is considered

צדקה גמורה/Tzedakah Gemurah-complete Tzedakah.

This is a radical, unsettling, even troubling, message from the Talmud.

However, if we take the words metaphorically:

it might mean that —

by setting an example for one’s children

by being a Tzedakah-active parent —

it may possibly save the child

from a lifeless Life, i.e.,

one without depth or meaningful values.

- X. Reviewing I to IX, at some point you may want to ask yourself
as a human being and a Jew,
“How is all this relevant to you?”
“How important *really* is this?”
(i.e., how high are Mitzvahs on my list of personal priorities?)

(Gimel) Mitzvah-Protection

There are additional positives to being engaged in Mitzvahs. Most striking is a statement in the Talmud (*Pesachim, page 8b*) by Rabbi Elazar that the Mitzvah-person is protected not only *en route* but also on the way back from the Mitzvah:

איתמר אמר רבי אלעזר שלוחי מצוה אינן ניוזקין לא בהליכתן ולא בחזירתן

**It was stated, “Rabbi Elazar said,
‘No harm happens to people on a Mitzvah-mission —
neither on the way to doing the Mitzvah,
nor on the way back.’”**

The Talmud is clearly not saying by “protection” that you should put yourself in a physically dangerous situation, as if there were some science-fiction Star Trekky force field around you. It seems to me that the harm that Rabbi Elazar is teaching is a number of intangibles, namely, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and existential protections. We need only keep in mind that referred pain (e.g., from an amputated limb) and psychosomatic pain are no less real to the person suffering than the physically tangible, measurable types of pain.

With the help of several friends, here is what we came up with about “protection”: Being engaged in Mitzvahs *may* or possibly *can* potentially minimize, fight, limit, remove — or even occasionally cure — a sense or feeling of

*pessimism, discouragement, cynicism,
the toxicity of indifference, emptiness,
isolation-and-loneliness, boredom,
hopelessness, senselessness, meaninglessness, purposelessness,
incessant whining and grumbling, insecurity, insensitivity,
meanness, tightfistedness, Pharaohic hardheartedness
insensitive superficiality,
egocentricity, arrogance, and condescension
leading to the insensitive inattention to the needs of other people,
ruthlessness (חס ושלום/chass veShalom-God forbid!), and
depression leading possibly to chronic melancholy or
despair, envy, and/or misplaced and overemphasized anxiety and stress.*

With the help of my physician friends: Significantly, the last on the list — **stress** — has been proven medically to lead to a variety of *physical* conditions and illnesses. Thus, because of reduced stress — being engaged in Mitzvah acts *may* or *can* potentially minimize, counteract, control, or limit

*headaches, stomach aches, ulcers, diarrhea,
muscle tension, bladder spasms, sleep disorders,
hyperventilation, hypertension,
and — more seriously — (חס ושלום/chass veShalom-God forbid!)
to subsequent incidents of elevated blood sugar, or even
myocardial infarction, coronary thrombosis, arteriosclerosis.*

(Dalet) One additional note:

In any discussion of this text, I have always heard remarkable comments about why someone is also protected on the way back after having completed the Mitzvah-mission. You are welcome to add your own insights.

Anthropology

You do what you have to do.

**Some peoples breed fierce horsemen, in antiquity
to defend or attack, now, perhaps more for leisurely sport.**

Jews do Mitzvahs.

**Some peoples breed parsimony into their children,
otherworldliness, or faith. Or to speak laconically.**

We do Mitzvahs. It's what we do.

I would imagine on the solid authority

of *National Geographic* that there are yet

numerous bushman tribes whose breadwinners

can knock monkeys out of a treetop with their darts

far better than we. They have to because it is their dinner.

**We do Mitzvahs. It's what we have to do, being our life
and the length of our days.**

16. מזיקין-Mazikin

There is a passage in the Babylonian* Talmud (*Berachot 6a*) that is very unsettling.

אבא בנימין אומר
אלמלי נתנה רשות לעין לראות
אין כל בריה יכולה לעמוד מפני המזיקין
אמר אביי
אינהו נפיש מינן

Abba Binyamin says:

If the eye only had the power to see,

no human being could withstand all the מזיקין/Mazikin.

Abayye said: They outnumber us.

מזיקין/Mazikin (also called **שדים/Shaydim**) are invisible, harmful, sometimes very nasty demons whose sole purpose is to hurt human beings and damage the world in an enormous variety of ways. For centuries afterwards, neither our sages nor the common people doubted their existence. If we “depersonalize” the **מזיקין/Mazikin** and understand them as the rationally-inexplicable bad forces and phenomena that we experience and see all around us, Abba Binyamin's and Abayye's words are very discouraging. Just consider some of the events a few years ago: Hurricanes, an earthquake, murders of schoolchildren, and a senseless massacre of fans at a concert in Las Vegas. “Overwhelming” certainly comes to mind – psychologically, emotionally, and, for some people, spiritually.

Abba Binyamin *does* say that human beings have an innate defense mechanism: Our blinded eyes (our minds) are unable to digest the totality of illogical, indeed, inhuman disasters and evils. Without this protection, we would become dysfunctional and unable to accomplish positive Mitzvah-acts of building a *Menschlich* society by doing good.

Accepting the reality, **we choose to fight**, picking up our tools and beginning to do our job of repairing the damage.

I believe that the two most crucial tools for this work are **צדק/Tzedek** and **צדקה/Tzedakah**. Linguistically, in the Bible these terms are often interchangeable — “Justice”,

“righteousness”, even “righteous victory”. In my writings, though, I usually differentiate: **צדק/Tzedek** as establishing a completely just and fair society, and **צדקה/Tzedakah** (as an all-inclusive term) as personal acts of doing good for others. An exception is when **צדקה/Tzedakah** is contrasted specifically with **גמילות חסדים/Gemillut Chassadim**, which are the *physical* actions of doing good — **צדקה/Tzedakah** means caring by using a certain percentage of our money.

#1. צדק/Tzedek: I have always found the preamble to the American Constitution to articulate **צדק/Tzedek** with great eloquence: “...establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity...” Actualizing these VIP’s-Values, Ideals, and Principles would include the right to vote, to legislate anti-discrimination laws, to establish fair trade practices and a living wage for workers, to set up unbiased courts, and to provide universal affordable, accessible health care, however these might be logistically configured. To realize these high principles and programs, we as individuals are called upon to vote, demonstrate, lobby, and ethically politically maneuver within the system of the Powers That Be.

#2. צדקה/Tzedakah: All of the above in **#1** is society-repair on The Grand Scale. So, we might ask, what difference does (A) buying one extra item of food for the food bank when you grocery shop, or even (B) Chesley Sullenberger’s safely landing his crippled airplane in the Hudson River with no loss of a single passenger’s life, or (C) buying a bunch of jump ropes or crayons at The Dollar Store for children who don’t have them so they can enjoy their childhood – what difference, in the Great Scheme of Things do they *really* make? Two stories may provide some Jewish answer:

The Kid And The Starfish On The Beach:** An adult walking along the beach sees hundreds of starfish, and a young child throwing them back into the water one-by-one. He says to the child, “There are so many of them here, what difference are you making?” The child picks one up, throws it back into the water, and answers, “It made a difference to that one!” This is exactly what the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin, 4:5*) states:

**וְכָל הַמְּקִימִים נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת
מֵעֵלָה עָלָיו הַכֶּתֵּיב בְּאֵלֵי קַיִם עוֹלָם מְלֵא**

**Whoever saves a single life,
it is as if that person had save an entire world.**

Rabbi Akiva was still illiterate at age 40. He sat in school with his young son and the other children his age learning the **א/Aleph-ב/Bet** until he had learned “**כל-התורה/kol hatorah kula-all of Torah**”. Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar compared it to a stonecutter who, sitting on a mountain, said he was going to uproot the mountain and toss it into the Jordan. He kept chipping away pebble by pebble until he reached a big boulder. He crawled under it, uprooted it and pushed it until it rolled down into the river. (*Avot deRabbi Natan A:6*)

I believe that there is something really significant — even magnificent – about the tale of Rabbi Akiva, the metaphorical stonecutter, and the mountain. It might just happen, it could just be that in The Real World, these individual acts will expand, explode, radiate out into a smashing defeat of the **מזיקין/Mazikin** and **שדים/Shaydim** and contribute to an enormous sigh of relief for multitudes of hard-pressed and suffering human beings.

There are certainly no guarantees.

But you just never know.

**The late Torah Giant, Rabbi Louis Ginzberg, ז"ל, explained that the presence of שדים/Shaydim and מזיקין/Mazikin was prominent in the Babylonian Talmud, but rarely mentioned in The Talmud of The Land of Israel. Some attribute this to the different local cultures. While I had been certainly aware of how frequent the references were in the Babylonian text, I was stunned when I was looking up words in Sokoloff’s Dictionary of Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic, just how many מזיקין/Mazikin and שדים/Shaydim were listed. Some even had names.*

***Almost every kid I've spoken to knows the starfish story, but when they recite it to me, there are frequent variations. For example, it usually happens that when a female student relates the story, it is almost always a young girl on the beach throwing the starfish back into the water and teaching the lesson to the adult.*

17. Three Things to Remember When Performing Caring Mitzvahs

אמר רבי יונה
אשרי משכיל אֶל-דָּל

Rabbi Yonah stated:

Happy is the person who is משכיל-maskil in relation to a דל-dal. (Psalm 41:2)

(Aleph) My Method for #17: This Dvar Torah is not an academic exercise or analysis. Nor is it the result of any extensive research into the intricacies of Biblical and Talmudic grammar, syntax, or etymology. Only when absolutely necessary, did I employ those analytical tools to attempt to derive practical Life-lessons from the verse and our sage's insights.

Concerning Rabbi Yonah, the Talmudic sage who interprets Psalm 41:2 below, I did not explore his personality, the specific circumstances of his personal life, describe the times he lived in, or who his teachers and students were, even though any one of these might have helped me to uncover hints about his intended Torah-insights from the verse in Psalms.

Also, I did not theorize about why we have received *three different versions* of his words. I leave that to scholars of Rabbinic literature. Furthermore, although Rabbi Yonah describes a situation involving a response with צדקה/Tzedakah money, clearly **גמילות חסדים**/Gemillut Chassadim-personal acts of kindness also apply to his interpretations.

All translations are my own.

(Bet) Rabbi Yonah's Initial Insight:

אמר ר' יונה אשרי נותן אל דל אין כת' כן
אלא אשרי משכיל אל דל הו' מסתכל בן היאך לזכות בן

Rabbi Yonah said,

“Happy is the person who נותן-gives to the person in need”

is not what the verse says,

but rather,

“Happy is the one who is משכיל-Maskil

to do the Mitzvah the best way

in relation to the person in need.”

The key word is משכיל/maskil, which means using all our mental faculties and personal powers when doing the kind of Mitzvah that benefits a **דל/dal-poor person**. To me, משכיל/maskil includes applying our insight, sensitivity, creativity, imagination, empathy, our emotions (even our minor behavioral quirks and idiosyncrasies), psychological moods, habits, personal preferences, and logical inconsistencies, including concerns, hopes, and failures, desires, and dreams, our hurts, and personal highs and lows, including what makes us happy or sad, our feelings and moments of loneliness and aloneness, love, and any random accidents and chance encounters that may have happened to us in our lives.

Furthermore, if we allow a centuries-and-linguistic leap, we might include the Yiddish שכל/sechel (from the same three-letter root as משכיל): *common sense, street smarts*. One or more of these components in combination may come into play for us when

smarts. One or more of these components in combination may come into play for us when we respond to a similar situation that we might encounter, instead (as Rabbi Yonah teaches) of only giving money. In truth, using any one or combination of these aspects of our brain's functions and our physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual capabilities may allow us a much broader range of possibilities when we respond to the Mitzvah-at-hand.

Concerning the word **דל**/*dal*: Rabbi Yonah is referring to someone who is literally poor. As I translated above, I prefer “person in need”. This goes beyond financial need. Obviously, some people are poor not only because they lack money and concrete *things*, but among many intangibles, also comforting words, rich, deep experiences, and satisfying or high moments in their lives.

(Gimel) More on The First Version Of Rabbi Yonah's Comment (Jerusalem Talmud Pe'ah 8:8): Rabbi Yonah interprets the words to mean is

הָדָא דְמִסְתַּכֵּל בְּמִצְוָה הֵיאֵךְ לַעֲשׂוֹתָהּ

the person looks at the Mitzvah to consider

how to do it in the best possible way.

The following is a sample list of needs-and-responses:

- (1) Establishing food banks and soup kitchens, of course.
- (2) Providing free heating during cold winters.
- (3) Giving computers and internet access
to children in poor families having to attend virtual classrooms.
- (4) Think of the Make A Wish Foundation,
and similar organizations
for children with life-threatening diseases
such as Songs of Love (songsoflove.org)
- (5) Of a related nature — *though not because of extreme illness*:
23 years ago, PK Beville created Second Wind Dreams(SWD)
for residents of nursing homes and assisted-living facilities.
Staff members ask residents what their dreams are,
and, whenever feasible, SWD makes their dreams come true,
giving them an experience that they had never thought
possible in their lifetime.
Of the many thousands of dreams that SWD has provided,
several dreams are surprisingly easy and inexpensive,
e.g., a cupholder on a resident's wheelchair,
and a great number of the dreams-come-true
are worthy of a “four hankies” response.
- (6) Blake Mycoskie, founder of TOMS Shoes,
donates a pair of shoes for every pair a customer buys.
- (7) Over several winters in New York City,
Michael Meyer (“Gloves”) Greenberg
distributed gloves to homeless people.
Greenberg made the wise and *menschlich* decision
always to seek out the individuals
who held back from approaching him for the gloves —
because they were too broken or shy.
- (8) Releasing a portion of the *billions* of dollars
in university and college endowment funds
to provide low-cost or free higher education
for those students who otherwise could not afford it.
A stark example is Harvard University. The numbers:
In 2020, Harvard's Endowment Fund had \$39,200,000,000.*
Calculating even the high tuition. cost of dorm room and books.

every entering first-year student that year
could have attended for free.
Without even having touched the principle.

(Dalet) *The Second Version* (Leviticus Rabba 34:1):

היאך לזכות בו

to keep in mind that it is a privilege to do this Mitzvah:

(A) How different we might feel and act knowing that Tzedakah is a privilege and not a burden!

(B) With “privilege” in mind, some people engaged in doing good might want to consider reciting “ברוך השם יום יום/*baruch HaShem yom yom*-Blessed be God every day that I am able to perform this Mitzvah”.

(Hay) *The third version* (מדרש תהלים/*volume of Midrash on Psalms*):

וחושב עליו היאך להחיותו

who considers
how to restore a decent and dignified life
to the recipient.

Isaiah’s words (35:3:4) come to mind:

חֲזְקוּ יָדַיִם רַפּוֹת
וּבְרָכִים כְּשֵׁלוֹת אֲמָצוֹ
אֲמָרוּ לְנִמְהָרֵי־לֵב
חֲזְקוּ אֶל־תִּירָאוֹ

Strengthen the hands that are weak;
Make firm the shaky knees!
Say to the anxious of heart,
“Be strong, fear not.” (Isaiah 35:3-4)

How astonishing! *Each of us* has the power to repair the life of another person whose existence has been twisted out of balance, broken, or shattered by circumstance — and even to save another human being from death. Perhaps a preferred, free translation of תְּצִיל מִמּוֹת וּצְדָקָה תַצִּיל מִצָּר/*uTzedakah tatzil miMavet* (Proverbs 10:12, 11:2) instead of “Tzedakah saves from death”, would be “The person who performs the Mitzvah of Tzedakah saves from death”.

I believe it is important that in our own *real* daily Jewish lives, we understand that
true power is Mitzvah-power
and that by activating this power, *virtually anyone of us* can work life-saving miracles.

(Vav) *One Additional Lesson from Rabbi Yonah*: Whenever we study Torah, we should not hesitate to pursue *anything* that seems even a little remotely troubling or out of sync with our vision of The Good. We should consider what Life-messages Rabbi Yona revealed to us from that single word מַשְׁכִּיל/*maskil*. I believe that we will discover more ideas, insights, and *actions* that will lessen the pain of people who are suffering, restore hope to many individuals living lives of desperation, and, quite possibly, save the lives of yet others who had lost any hope that they would ever live to see their daughter, son, granddaughter, or grandson stand under a חֹפֶה/*chuppah*.

**And the university endowment committee energetically continues to aggressively solicit additional donations. Are we in the Twilight Zone?*

Once, after a talk after I had mentioned the Harvard Endowment Fund, a Harvard graduation in about his 40’s said he felt uncomfortable to respond to the mail solicitation with a donation. Neither he nor I used the word “stupid”, but I think that was the thrust of his question;

18. There Are 929 Chapters in The תנ"ך/Tanach

I. The First Text — זכריה/Zechariah 8:4-5:

“929” is a program in Israel, and because of the Internet’s Zoom capabilities, there are participants everywhere. There are 929 chapters in the Bible, and the participants commit themselves to studying five chapters* a week, which translates to 3½ years to read from Genesis 1:1 to Second Chronicles 36:23. Some participate as individuals, others meet weekly in small (nowadays) virtual discussion groups.

Now, a certain number of Bible students might have a personal favorite *chapter*. But almost anyone who even casually peruses the text may find some *verse* or *couple of verses* that personally resonate deep in his or her soul, and develop into a frequent point of reference, or possibly even an essential guide in their lives.

One of my favorite selections is the prophet זכריה/Zechariah’s vision (8:4-5):

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת
עַד יָשׁוּבוּ זִקְנִים וְזִקְנוֹת בְּרַחֲבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם
וְאִישׁ מִשְׁעֲנֵתוֹ בְּיָדוֹ מִרְבַּי יָמִים:
וְרַחֲבוֹת הָעִיר יִמְלְאוּ יְלָדִים וְיִלְדוֹת
מִשְׁחָקִים בְּרַחֲבֵתֶיהָ:

Thus said the Lord of Hosts:

**There shall yet be old men and women in the squares of Jerusalem,
Each with staff in hand because of their great age.**

**And the squares of the city shall be crowded
with boys and girls playing in the squares.**

Whatever problems the Jewish people had in Sixth Century BCE Judah — and no doubt there were *very* serious societal issues — זכריה/Zechariah yet envisioned this (some doubters would add “unrealistic”) magnificently peaceful scene.

I will return to the prophet’s vision below.

II. The Second Text — Maimonides, *Sefer HaMitzvot, Positive Mitzvah #206**

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ

“Love others as you love yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18)

וכל-מה-שארצה לעצמי ארצה לו כמוהו

**Whatever I want for myself,
I want the same for that other person.**

וכל-מה-שלא ארצה לעצמי ולידידי

לא ארצה לו בשבילו כמוהו

והוא אמרו יתעלה ואהבת לרעך כמוך

**And whatever I do not want for myself or for my friends,
I do not want for that other person.**

This is the meaning of God’s Words,

“And you shall love the other person as yourself.”

Having decided that this was one of my favorite texts, locating it in the Rambam was not difficult. There were only 613 possibilities in his ספר המצוות/*Sefer HaMitzvot* — 248 positive Mitzvahs and 365 negative ones. I had remembered that it was Positive Mitzvah #206.** Of all of our Jewish texts that I have studied about צדקה/*Tzedakah* and Mitzvahs, I think that Maimonides’ text offers the clearest and simplest guide and most practical criteria for the decision-making process to how to use our צדקה/*Tzedakah* money, and how and where to devote our Mitzvah-time-and-physical efforts for גמילות *Gemillut*. What particularly appeals to me is the incredible range of possibilities for

doing good for others.

We might be motivated to personally:

- (1) provide for, or arrange access to tangible necessities, such as food, medications, clothing, housing, and other essentials;
- (2) and intangible ones, like psychological, emotional, and spiritual support;
- (3) provide expertise, supervision, mentoring, education, and training;
- (4) meaningful employment;
- (5) a good, caring **חברה/chevra**
- (6) reinforcing and fostering a positive self-image.
- (7) “To provide for, or arrange access to,” naturally includes advocacy for legislation to discover and eliminate the broader root-problems of society.

III. The Third Text — Midrash Mishlay (Proverbs 12:1, [Visotzky Edition]):

א"ר זעירא... כל מי שהוא ישן על מיטתו בלילה ומתחשב בלבו ואומר למחר אני משכים ועושה טובה עם פלוני

Rabbi Ze'ira said:

**Whoever thinks to himself or herself
before going to sleep at night
and says,**

**“When I wake up tomorrow,
I will do good things for So-and-So”...**

Back to numbers: There are many thousands of ideas and Torah insights in our vast Midrashic literature. The promise of reward in Rabbi Zeira's words (the "...", which I omitted) is not the focus of this Dvar Torah. For me, what is significant is that, like the Rambam's words above, it is open-ended. Though Rabbi Zeira says we should pick ***one specific individual*** for our morning start-the-day-off-with-a-Mitzvah, we are free to choose ***anything good*** to do for that other person—***anything***. This includes even making a phone call, sending a text or e-mail (5-10 minutes, maybe a little more?) in order to re-establish contact with someone after having been out of touch for too long, or doing something special like sending chocolate-dipped strawberries to a friend for no particular reason other than your friendship.

Both text **#II** and **#III** are examples of ***personalized Tzedakah***, i.e., individuals acting toward repairing and invigorating the world with their own time, effort, talents, and money. Bringing order, balance, and harmony to humanity's and the world's chaos means: This will happen one Mitzvah at a time. However — and with some degree of justification — critics have commented that this approach is too haphazard, scattered, and disorganized to manage the sheer complexity and massiveness of the world's brokenness.

Not so long ago, for many of us, just one major concern was the welfare of Israel and its citizens. **A.** The enemies, **B.** their enemies' friends, **C.** their lethal tools, and **D.** their malicious methods are legion — **E.** pot-shot rockets from Gaza; **F.** immense propaganda machines; **G.** the ugly, strident words of explicit, subtle, and not-so-subtle anti-Semites***, and **H.** the legislators, diplomats, and heads of state who deny or ignore the historical truth of Israel's right to exist. It's not that that particular potentially-catastrophic crisis had miraculously disappeared, but, in recent times, it has been replaced by a virus-enemy so small (it is 10-20 or somesuch *nanometers* in size – whatever that means), that threatens every human being on earth.

So where and why should the message of **זכריה/Zechariah** the Prophet enter into our Twenty-First Century consciousness? His words and graphic image of the people at peace are undeniably powerful. In fact, they are even carved in stone in the Old City of Jerusalem for Israeli and tourist alike to see, read, consider, and remember.

Is it so naïve for us to give so much consideration to his vision? I think not. and I

believe that we would do well to do so. It might be an appropriate time to recall and memorize these two verses from the prophet. At the very least, doing so may ease the oppressive uncertainty about our future, and bring comfort to the weariness of our souls.

Is it possible that somehow Maimonides' and Rabbi Zeira's ostensibly-unrealistic and apparently-unsystematic suggestions might point us to Zechariah's vision? What comes to my mind are two overused, trite images: The Rambam's criterion and Rabbi Zeira's wake-up call might remind us how the light of one candle dispels an absolutely disproportionate amount of darkness, and that, no matter how long a tunnel may be, at the end of the dark journey, there will always be light. And in that light, our eyes will naturally adjust, and we may just possibly see what זכריה/Zechariah saw and worth repeating:

כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת
עַד יֵשְׁבוּ זְקֵנִים וְזִקְנוֹת בְּרַחֲבוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם
וְאִישׁ מִשְׁעֲנֵתוֹ בְּיָדוֹ מִרְבַּיָּמִים:
וְרַחֲבוֹת הָעִיר יִמְלְאוּ יְלָדִים וְיִלְדוֹת
מִשְׁחָקִים בְּרַחֲבֵתֶיהָ:

*There shall yet be old men and women in the squares of Jerusalem,
Each with staff in hand because of their great age.
And the squares of the city shall be crowded
with boys and girls playing in the squares.*

**Who knows how many verses there are in the 929 chapters, important as that might be? I am sure somebody (the early Soferim? medieval Jewish commentators? a modern-day Bible-geek? Google?) has counted.*

***It was easier to recall than the numbers on my license plates or my bank account number.*

****The the extent of the spread of anti-Israel rhetoric and demonstrations (often as a cover of anti-Semitism) is unbelievably troubling. But it is happening.*

19. The Meaning Of גדול/Gadol And Other Significant Talmudic Descriptives

At times, the most common Hebrew words are the most difficult to translate. They may have a wide range of meanings, or the concept they represent may be difficult to grasp completely. For example, טוב/*tov* – is it *good, excellent, superb, astonishing*? יפה/*yafeh* could mean *beautiful, stunning, good* (as in “well done”)? In Biblical Hebrew, כח/*koach* – usually “*strength*”, but often means “*agricultural produce*”. פעולה/*pe'ulah* can mean “*the work*”, “*the product of the work*”, or “*the worker's wages*”.

One of my favorites — and toughest — is גדול/*gadol* in all its related grammatical forms. As any child or adult first learning Hebrew knows, it means “*big*”. (Biblically it sometimes also means “*wealthy*”, but this meaning does not related to my Dvar Torah.)

This brings me to my most difficult text (*Gittin 59a*):

ואמר רבא בריה דרבה
ואיתימא רבי הילל בריה דרבי וולס
מימות משה ועד רבי
לא מצינו
תורה וגדולה במקום אחד

**Rava the son of Rabbah —
and some say Rabbi Hillel the son of Rabbi Vales said:
From the days of Moses until Rabbi [Yehuda HaNassi]
we have not found אחד במקום אחד/**
Torah uGedulah baMakom echad-
Torah and greatness together in one place [i.e., in one person].

Some thoughts and questions:

1. Comparing *anyone* to Moses makes me uncomfortable
2. For Moses – גדולה/*gedulah-greatness* is obvious. Whose *stature* in the history of the Jewish people could match that of Moshe?
3. Although we know that Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi was a very wealthy man, there is no indication in the Torah that Moses was rich.
4. It can't be referring to Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi's ultra-knowledge of Torah. That was surely the domain of the legendary Rabbi Akiva a couple of generations before.

Groping around, I began to think about human superlatives:

Who is an equal to a Rashi or Maimonides?

*In art, even in a field including Rembrandt, Monet, and Picasso —
who compares to Michelangelo and Da Vinci?*

*Not that Brahms, Tchaikovsky, and Bach were not giants,
but they are not in the same class as Beethoven and Mozart.*

Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare naturally come to mind in literature.

*In science, Einstein always stands in a special place,
no matter how many others had won Nobel Prizes in physics.*

*To an American Historian,
Washington and Lincoln stand alone among Presidents.*

*And, of course, a Queen of England outranks by any measure
a princess, baroness, or duchess.*

As an American growing up mornings reading the sports pages of the *Washington Post* at breakfast, it was natural that I came to study the stories not only the stars of my childhood, but also The All-Time Greats: Babe Ruth, Satchel Paige, and Jim Thorpe.

I then moved on to thinking about how some speakers are introduced for lectures: “distinguished”, “eminent”, “pre-eminent”, “esteemed”, and “legendary”.

And then to terminology, for example, *prodigy* like Jascha Heifetz.

Genius, unfortunately, has frequently been watered down and applied to every Yoram, Shepsel, or Chezki.*

All that being said, it appears that it was possibly Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi's communal stature that moved the two rabbis to make their bold statements.* Other than his ability to move relatively comfortably among the Roman authorities, I don't know enough of, or about, those modern lecturers-on-the-posters' biographies to make a definitive comment. But they are definitely *not* in the same class as, The Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Yosef Rosen (“The Rogatchover”, 1858-1936) or the Liebermans and Soloveitchiks in my own lifetime.

For some reason — and still puzzling to me — in the minds of the Talmudic sages, *something* about Rabbi Yehudi HaNassi put him in a category that allowed him to be mentioned in the same sentence with Moses. I suspect that the reason is that Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi composed and edited the Mishnah, the fundamental text upon which so much later Halachic literature rests. But to be honest, I do not have enough knowledge of the Talmud, nor enough of a “feel” for the minds of the sages, to say this with total confidence.

I began this brief study wondering about the word גדול/*gadol* relating to people. I

believe that, for our own Torah-enrichment, we would do well to do the same with some ostensibly minor or secondary terms from Talmudic and subsequent times. They are not as well known as **תלמיד/Talmid, רב/Rav, חבר/Chaver, תלמיד חבר/Talmid-Chaver, חכם/Chacham,** and **תלמיד חכם/Talmid Chacham:**

(1a) **חשוב/Chashuv-important** — by what criteria?

(1b) **חשובה-חשוב/chashuv-chashuva (feminine)-“important” as in אשה חשובה/isha chashuva-an important woman.***** In some instances it refers to an upper-class or financially well-to-do woman. In general, though, I do not have a good understanding of the times, the setting, and the reasoning for special treatment.

(2) **צדיק גמור/Tzaddik Gamur-a completely righteous person.** Why did the Rabbis need such a term? Wasn't **צדיק/Tzaddik-righteous person** alone sufficient? Or did they, as it were, mean to imply that they are “downgrading” **צדיק/Tzaddik** to *Mensch*?

Now, since Biblical poetry is based on parallelism, i.e., that the second half often states the same as the first, there is a Biblical verse (*Proverbs 2:20*) that reinforces my contention:

לְמַעַן תֵּלֶךְ בְּדַרְךְ טוֹבִים
וְאַרְחוֹת צְדִיקִים תִּשְׁמַר

**So follow the way of Good People,
and keep to the paths of Tzaddikim.**

(3) Finally, and I think it is of the utmost important term for our study to understand the term **כשר אדם/adam kasher-a Kosher person.**** It is a magnificent way to describe a human being, i.e., a person of absolute integrity, humble, decent, generous — a Kosher person. It does not necessarily refer to the person's ritual observance. The Talmud (*Mo'ed Katan 25a*) beautifully explains an **כשר אדם/adam kasher-a Kosher human being's** stature:

שכל הבוכה ומתאבל
על אדם כשר
מוחלין לו על כל עונותיו
בשביל כבוד שעשה לו

**Whoever weeps and mourns
for an Adam Kasher,
all of that person's sins are forgiven
because of the honor that person showed for the deceased.**

In general, perhaps we might want to review in our minds and actions people we should hold in high respect, and why, and perhaps to open our minds to refining the value-criteria that we consider when we think of other individuals.

This may better reflect the personal values we, ourselves, seek in Life, and how we relate to others.

My late Rebbi in Jewish education, Abraham J. Gittelsohn, humorously commenting on my having seen too many announcements about forthcoming lectures to be given by every Moshe, Yossi, and Chaim as **הרב הגדול/HaRav HaGadol-The Great Rabbi Chaim, Yehudah, or Naftali, suggested that a true Torah genius should be called **a BIG Gadol.***

***The term **כשר אדם/adam kasher** appears 11 times in the Babylonian Talmud, six times in Rashi, 14 in the Rambam, nine in the Shulchan Aruch, eight in the Mishnah Berurah, and 25 times in the Aruch HaShulchan.*

****Just one example: according to Talmudic Halachah, she (though a woman) should also recline at the Passover like the men. There are other Halachic instances of special treatment for an **אשה חשובה/isha chashuva-an “important woman”.***

20. Paho'eho'e and A'a

I. An important ancient discussion —

Sometime in approximately the mid-Third Century CE, the Talmudic sages had the following exchange. (*Bava Kamma 30b*):

אמר רב יהודה
האי מאן דבעי למהוי חסידא
לקיים מילי דנזיקין
רבא אמר: מילי דאבות
ואמרי לה: מילי דברכות

Rav Yehuda said:

**If you want to be a חסיד-chassid,
you should personify the words of נזיקין-Nezikin;**

Rava said:

**The words of אבות-(Pirkay) Avot,
and Some Say:
the words of ברכות-Brachot.**

In order to attempt to understand their words, we need to briefly (and perhaps inadequately) clarify some of the terms they used:

(A) **נזיקין*-Nezikin/damages** – a large section of the Talmud covering a detailed analysis of the laws of a just and fair society such as torts, inheritance, loans, property rights, etc.), and how they function.

(B) **אבות-(Pirkay) Avot** – an anthology of words of wisdom by the sages about living The Good and Just Life;

(C) **ברכות-Brachot** – material about the many blessings Jews recite to raise their awareness of the miracle of God's gift of life and how to live it, and

(D) **חסיד-chassid** – an elusive, multivalent term, to be explored in the following section.

II. חסיד-chassid

Having different — even several — terms in any language is a window into the speaker's or writer's thinking, culture, and way of life. The terminology of Rav Yehuda, Rava, and whoever "Some Say" is, is not the same as the well-defined "a'a" and "paho'eho'e". Any experienced Scrabble player** knows the word *a'a* because it is the first word in the Scrabble dictionary. *A'a* is the *other* Hawaiian word beside *paho'eho'e* to describe the two types of lava. These two terms are obviously a crucial linguistic distinction for the residents of The Blessed Isles.

By comparison to the clear definitions of *a'a* and *paho'eho'e*, over several hundred years of discussions, the Talmudic sages discussed and described the types of Good People. They list four not-quite-so-clearly-delineated terms: כשר **אדם-adam kasher-Kosher person** (the nearest, I think, to what we call a *Mensch*), צדיק/tzaddik, גמור צדיק/tzaddik **gamur-a complete Tzaddik, and חסיד/chassid*****

Sometimes **חסיד-chassid** refers to a Jew who is particularly scrupulous about ritual Mitzvahs. However, by their four examples, the sages in our text are referring to a broader context — living Life — and the call to *Menschlichkeit*. As I hope to demonstrate, it appears that in their hierarchy of "a good person", a **חסיד-chassid** is often classified above

a צדיק-tzaddik.

III. Analyzing The Sages' Words

(1) The first problem is that Biblically חסיד and צדיק are sometimes parallel, as in *Psalm 145:17*. In Biblical poetry, parallel words or phrases are equivalent or nearly equivalent to each other, for example:

צדיק יהוה בכל דרכיו
וחסיד בכל מעשיו

God is צדיק in all God's ways,
and חסיד in all God's works.

This apparent synonymity complicates our interpretation of the text above. Despite the apparent equivalency in this *Biblical* verse, it is clear that, by *Talmudic* times centuries later, the Rabbis delineated a degree of difference between the two. An indication of how high “חסיד-chassid” is in the hierarchy of a person's goodness in the sages' thinking, is the fact that few individuals in the Talmud are called “חסיד-chassid”. Among those referred to by name are Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's student Rabbi Yossi HaKohen (*Pirkay Avot 2:10*), Hillel, and Shmuel HaKatan. (*Sotah 48b*)

(2) In the Talmud's description of the moment of birth we read (*Niddah 30b*):

דרש רבי שמלאי...
ואינו יוצא משם עד שמשביעין אותו ומה היא השבועה שמשביעין אותו
תהי צדיק ואל תהי רשע

Rabbi Simla'i gave the following public Torah lesson:...

An emerging newborn does not leave the womb
until it is made to swear an oath.

And what is that oath?

“Be a צדיק/Tzaddik,
and do not be רשע/rasha-a bad person”

If we translate צדיק/Tzaddik as “a righteous person”, I have always felt that this was an unreasonable demand, and instead, I translate “[Attempt to] be a Mensch.” The fact that the sages created a term גמור צדיק/Tzaddik gamur, a complete צדיק/Tzaddik, indicates to me that a “regular” צדיק/Tzaddik is not always to be translated “a righteous person”. It is often closer in meaning to an אדם כשר/adam kasher-a Kasher person, a Mensch.

(3) If we understand “חסיד-chassid”*** perhaps as “A great Mensch”, i.e., a person's superior ethical behavior in relation to others, i.e., one who acts לפנים משורת הדין/lifnim miShurat haDin-beyond the letter of the ethical law — then the three opinions are even more remote from reasonable reach for the vast majority of people. חסיד/chassid is a much more difficult human goal than attempting to be a צדיק/Tzaddik-Mensch. Telling newborns to be a חסיד/chassid would be tantamount to saying to children who demonstrate an aptitude in various areas of intellectual achievement or have other precocious talents that they should strive to be *THE* very greatest: A queen and not “merely” a princess, a Mozart or Beethoven, a Babe Ruth, an Einstein or Newton, a Rambam, or Rabbi Akiva.

IV. A Possible Solution (*Sukkah 49b*)

ואמר רבי אלעזר
אין צדקה משתלמת אלא לפי חסד שבה

Rabbi Elazar said: Complete צדקה-Tzedakah is only accomplished
according to the degree of חסד-chessed-caring and compassion in the act.

I have always taught that acts of **צדקה/Tzedakah** and **גמילות חסדים/Gemillut Chassadim-acts of caring, loving kindness** still fulfill the Mitzvah – even if they are done automatically, with inadequate intent, or for the wrong reasons**** — because the beneficiary still benefits. *But* Rabbi Elazar’s point is that the absolutely best way we might do good things for others would be when we do them with **חסד/chessed-pure caring, loving kindness, done with our entire being – mind, heart, and soul**. To illustrate his principle, Rabbi Elazar quotes Hosea 10:12:

זרעו לכם לצדקה
וקצרו לפי חסד

**Plant the seeds of Tzedakah,
and reap according to the חסד/chessed.**

V. Summarizing My Interpretation of the Text at the Beginning of this Dvar Torah

(Aleph) I believe that the fact that Rav Yehuda states all three possibilities as potential pathways to *Menschlichkeit* is of crucial importance. The text is offering three distinct options to different types of individuals for their own possible *personal* direction, the one which best fits their unique genes and personalities.***** Some people will find it more comfortable and more to their liking to work through Justice as spelled out in great detail in **נזיקין/Nezikin**, the easily-accessible words of wisdom about living the Good, Upright Life in **אבות/(Pirkay) Avot**, or the beauty and regularity of being reminded of God’s gifts through **ברכות/Brachot**.

(Bet) It is true that, in some instances depending on the context, I have occasionally “demoted” **צדיק/Tzaddik** to *Mensch*, which is why at this point, I want to change scenarios. Not to be flippant or to be disrespectful of the sages, but indulge me just for a moment. Let us imagine another sage participating in that Talmudic discussion that day: My mother, Edythe Silberblatt Siegel (**מנוחתה עדן/menuchata Eden-May her soul eternally rest peacefully in the Garden of Eden**). No doubt, she would have said, “With all due respect, Rabbis, doesn’t it make more reasonable and realistic sense to teach, ‘If you want to be an **אדם-אדם-אדם-kasher-a Mensch, follow the words of...**’?”

All my years of growing up, her message was clear, “*Be good, and do good*”.

Because of her, I have often said to my audiences and students that,
*the more I think about it,
the Torah and Talmud sound a lot like my Mother.*

(Gimel) *But* on the other hand, in a way I have restored **חסיד/chassid** to its proper place in the Talmudic hierarchy of values: *In some texts*, the term should be properly applied to those few individuals — among the millions of people who practice a life of Mitzvahs towards others — who do it with everything human that they possess, their mind, heart, and soul.

(Dalet) In my opinion, I would only add that there exist more individuals who are worthy of the description “**חסיד/chassid**” than are usually considered. I have personally been in the company of more than 100 of them — Mitzvah heroes, our Rebbis of Mitzvahs, totally committed and devoted to the wellbeing of others.

***נזיקין** was originally 30 chapters and unwieldy; eventually it was broken up into three separate parts, *Bava Kamma, Bava Metzi’a, and Bava Batra, the First, Middle, and Last Gate.*

***Mitzvah hero and friend Alice Jonah is an avid participant in the Jerusalem Scrabble club. She informed me that it is one of the largest Scrabble-חברה/chevra anywhere.*

****There is obviously no connection to the modern-day term “Chassidim”, as there is a gap of many centuries between the founder Ba’al Shem Tov’s life (1698-1760) and the Talmudic era, approximately from the First Century BCE to the end of the Fifth Century CE.*

*****Except for money earned by dishonest means.*

******Rav Yehuda’s words are an ancient behavioral GPS for navigating through Life.*

21. Steven Spielberg, Einstein, Beethoven, And רבבה בר בר חנה/Rabbah Bar Bar Channah

I. Two verses from the Book of Psalms:

אוֹדֶה עַל כִּי נִרְאוֹת נִפְלִיתִי
נִפְלְאִים מַעֲשֵׂיךָ
וְנִפְשִׁי יִדְעַת מְאֹד

I praise You, for I am awesomely, wondrously made;
Your work is sublime,
and I am profoundly aware of it. (*Psalm 139:14*) and —

וְתַחֲסְרֶהוּ מְעַט מַאֲלָהִים
וְכַבֹּד וְהָדָר תַּעֲטֶרֶהוּ

You have created human beings a little lower than angels,
enhancing them with glory and majesty. (*Psalm 8:6*)

II. The mind: I have been thinking about the human brain recently. I have no understanding at all of the science of how the “right brain/left brain” matrix operates nor how the brain’s chemistry and neurotransmitters create thoughts, ideas, dreams, memories, and juxtapositions of the most imaginably remote or disparate connections. Fortunately, I’m not in medical school where I’d have to memorize thousands of details. And thankfully, Psalm 139:14 teaches me that it is enough for me just to be amazed.

My curiosity led me to a block of Midrash in the Talmud (*Bava Batra pages 73-75*). Wedged between the many detailed laws of buying a house or boat, business partnerships, and a squatter’s rights is a series of tales that are surely among the strangest in our ancient Jewish literature. The central figure of the stories is the sage רבבה בר בר חנה/Rabbah Bar Bar Channah. He reported that among the things he had seen — on his own or with the help of an Arab guide — were

Mt. Sinai (surrounded by enormous scorpions),
a hole in the ground from which hot steam was rising,
which is the place where Korach and his gang
were swallowed up as punishment
for their rebellion against Moses and Aaron.
Rabbah Bar Bar Channah added
that every 30 days you could hear voices recite from below,
“Moses and his Torah is true, and we are liars”.

He also saw:

the humongous זִיז-Ziz bird
with its feet on the bottom of the ocean
and its head in the clouds, and
the bodies of the Israelites who had died
during the 40 years’ wandering in the wilderness, and
standing on a high place,
he saw where heaven and earth touched!

Almost immediately, three possible reactions to these stories occurred to me:

(1) Children of the Sixties would jokingly comment that Rabbah Bar Bar Channah must have been smoking some first-class Colombian Gold *ganga* with an extra high percentage of THC;

(2) Undoubtedly, many psychiatrists would publish scholarly articles replete with

their peculiar psychiatric jargon in *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, and

(3) My father, a physician (מנורחטו עדן/*menuchato Eden*-May his soul eternally rest peacefully in the Garden of Eden), once explained to me that Rabbah Bar Bar Channah's accurate medical diagnosis was: "Rabbah Bar Bar Channah was definitely צעמישט אין קאפ/*tzemisht in kup-mixed-up in the head.*"

III. And yet, despite the fantastic nature of these stories and the killer linguistic problems, I go back again and again to Bava Batra 73-75. This morning, I began to understand what drew me back: Rabbah Bar Bar Channah was leading me frequently into the incredible, mysterious workings of the human mind. Here are just a few relevant examples I gathered, focusing on the areas of discovery, invention, and creativity:

(א) Thomas Edison, responding to a reporter's question about the huge number of his failed experiments, said, "I didn't fail 1,000 times. The light bulb was an invention of 1,000 steps."

I began to think, "And where *originally* did the very idea of the light bulb come from at all? What hormones and other chemicals circulating in Edison's wondrous, awesome body played a part that gave *him* specifically the persistence to try again and again?"

(ב) I imagine that it was the same body/mind phenomenon with Salk and Sabin in their search for the polio vaccine.

(ג) In a different scenario, Sir Alexander Fleming: One day, noticing a certain mold in a petri dish eating the "bad stuff", he discovered penicillin. Other people, applying their own God-given unique brains' talents, mass-produced enough of this wonder drug to save the lives of thousands of wounded soldiers' during World War II.

(ד) With a cerebral jump from Salk, Sabin, and Fleming, we could ask ourselves, "*How did anyone or any group of people invent a heart-lung machine? Where in the world did that come from?*"

(ה) And not far afield would be, "*Where did Homer's Iliad and Picasso's Guernica come from?*"

(ו) I was informed recently that Disney employed people as "Imagineers".

(ז) Similarly, let us imagine for a moment Steven Spielberg discovering our Rabbah Bar Bar Channah's stories in Hebrew High School. Then it really wouldn't be much of a stretch to understand the origin of *E.T.* and *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind.*

(ח) Ultimately, I thought of the Mystery of Einstein: With no computer or database, he discovered and revealed to humanity that the universe is expanding, that mass and energy were essentially the same, and that time itself sometimes flowed differently than we had always thought or felt. How did this remarkable man do it?

(ט) And on to the deaf Beethoven: Did he "hear" those famous four notes inside his brain and from there create his Fifth Symphony?

IV. Now — it is time to refer back to the two verses from the Book of Psalms, and the Torah-Life-lessons they are teaching.

(A) As much as possible we should be profoundly aware — not always, but at least occasionally — of the awesomeness and wondrous essence of human beings and of being human.

(B) That *awareness* is for our *minds*.

(C) As for our *actions* — even our most mundane activities — we ought to live our lives as if we are created to personify being just a little lower than the angels.

(D) It seems to me that the Psalmist's message is that we — even if not a Fleming, Edison, or Picasso — are capable of making good things happen in our lives that far exceed even our greatest imaginings.

(E) The lower-than-angels Psalm teaches us that there is really nothing to prevent us from making it so.

(F) If we take Psalm 139:14 seriously, once we conclude that our mind's reach is

infinite, and once we use it to direct our actions, who knows what will result that would set us on the right path? Then we might create a grand-and-quite-possibly-cosmic vision of a different, *Menschlich* world.

You just never know.

Finally, in the context of challenging the wrongs, ugliness, and evils of the world, the aphorism of the Chassidic Rebbi Nachman of Bratzlav's words ring true, "If you believe it's possible to damage, believe it's possible to restore."

and

our text teaches that, in our own lives, the sky is the limit.

The Road to Paradise

After God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, Genesis 3:24 states:

וַיִּשְׁכֵּן מִקְדָּם לְגֹרְעֵדֶן
אֶת־הַכְּרֻבִים
וְאֵת לַהֵט הַחֶרֶב הַמִּתְהַפֶּכֶת
לְשָׂמוֹ אֶת־דֶּרֶךְ עֵץ הַחַיִּים

**(God) stationed east of the Garden of Eden
the cherubim
and the fiery ever-turning sword
to guard the way
to the Tree of Life.**

The generally-accepted interpretation is that the **כְּרוּבִים/cherubim** and this wondrous sword were put there to prevent those disobedient mortals, descendants of Adam and Eve, from returning to Paradise. Having disobeyed God's instructions, they were no longer welcome.

This troubled me for many years. It just didn't seem right that the door to human happiness was being blocked.

That interpretation radically changed on Rosh HaShana a few years ago. At the "overflow" service, Rabbi Irving Elson, a Navy and Marine chaplain for 18 years, was again delivering the sermons, as he had done for a couple of previous years. For myself, one of them was no less than revelatory. He based his message on the last verse of the Marine Hymn:

*If the Army and the Navy
Ever look on Heaven's scenes;
They will find the streets are guarded
By United States Marines.*

According to Rabbi Elson, God placed the sword there to intimidate and remove obstacles like bullies, thugs, or cynics who would block the road. His powerful message was abundantly clear: Nothing should prevent a worthy human being from calmly and confidently making the journey to **עֵדֶן גֵּן/Gan Eden-The Garden of Eden, Paradise**.

As for the **כְּרוּבִים/cherubim** — they were not *blocking* the entrance to the garden. Why would we even think that they are keeping people out of Paradise?* To the contrary, we know from Numbers 7:89:

וַבָּא מֹשֶׁה אֶל־אֱהֹל מוֹעֵד
לְדַבֵּר אִתּוֹ
וַיִּשְׁמַע אֶת־הַקּוֹל מִדַּבַּר אֱלֹהִים
...
מִבֵּין שְׁנֵי הַכְּרֻבִים וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים

When God communicated with Moses in the Tabernacle, His voice emanated from between the two **כְּרוּבִים/cherubim** that were on top of the Ark.

The **כְּרוּבִים/cherubim**, as it were, were a welcoming presence where the Divine and the human could meet. So, too, at the entrance to Paradise, the **כְּרוּבִים/cherubim** were stationed there to greet the people and warmly invite them in.

**I am, of course, aware of the accepted interpretation that the sword and cherubim were placed there to keep out future human beings. Adam and Eve had ruined The Divine Plan, so another one had to be put in place. My Dvar Torah is simply another way at looking at the text.*

22. From Babylonia to Stockholm (late 2020)

I. An Important Talmudic Quote That I Think Is Worth Memorizing

שפיל ואזיל בר אווזא
ועיניה מטייפי

**Though a duck walks low to the ground,
its eyes are still constantly looking around.** (*Bava Kamma 92b*)

II. The Duck: I like pithy and catchy phrases, such as, “If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy”, and “If it walks like a duck and sounds like a duck, it’s a duck.” Naturally, this second quote reminded me of a series of other aphorisms on the same page of the Talmud (*Bava Kamma 92b*). Two of those are:

שיתין רהוטי רהוט
ולא מטו לגברא
דמצפרא כרך

**Sixty runners can run after you,
but can’t catch up to you
if you’ve had a good breakfast**

(surely one of the less profound pieces of wisdom from our ancient Sages).

and the one about the duck. But the one about the duck is definitely my favorite on *Bava Kamma 92b*’s list.

III. The Duck-Human Matrix: In the Talmudic text שפיל ואזיל בר אווזא ועיניה מטייפי, the syntax is vague, and the meaning of one word — *metyfay* — is uncertain. It is difficult to get a clear picture of what the duck is doing. So, I checked three different scholarly sources, and each one gave me a completely different translation and interpretation. The third — רש"י/Rashi — understood the phrase metaphorically, taking “duck” as “person”. *

My own understanding of this phrase is this:

The first half of the aphorism is simply a physical description - the duck is walking close to the ground because it has short legs. Yet, it keeps looking around for two reasons:

(1) It is watching for predators, and/or,

(2) having exhausted the food right in front of it, it is searching for other things to eat, either because it is still hungry, or so that later on there will be some other food that it might have missed that it will need in the future, to use the contemporary term, “food-insecure”. In the Real World, this is referred to as “food insecurity”.

IV. In Virus-Days and Normal Days: Then I began thinking about the conditions of Living With The Virus. Like the duck looking straight in front of itself, we can’t really be blamed or feel guilty about a concern for our own physical wellbeing. Of course, we also are also constantly looking around, not only for our own needs of the moment, but also for more possible long-range necessities as this condition drags on, and, eventually, when the coronavirus will only be a memory.

And certainly *of no less importance*, we must always stay aware of the disastrous situation globally. (*More below.*)

The COVID-weary person’s predator is explained in the following passage in the Talmud (*Ketubot 59b*):

שהבטלה מביאה לידי שיעמום

Idleness leads to שיעמום-*shi’amum*.

The term for the potential danger is שיעמום. The three-letter root of שיעמום is

עמם, meaning “dull”. In modern Hebrew **שיעמום**-*shi'amum* means “boredom”, but in the Talmud it has the sense of “**psychological disorientation**” and even “**insanity**”. Because of living in semi-isolation, isolation, or quarantine, some people can become mentally unsteady from anxiety, rational and irrational fear, and low-grade or deep depression bred by uncertainty, boredom, lassitude, and the inability to interact freely with friends, family, and any other people. The danger is that these reactions to the virus *may* lead a person to become psychologically and emotionally disoriented or paralyzed.

In addition, adjusting to the fact that, in many situations, virtual reality has had replaced “real” reality with Zoom undoubtedly compounds the psychological burden for many people. As a result, being disoriented, dysfunctional, or mentally paralyzed, may prevent a person from *actively* doing compassionate, caring Mitzvahs.

Therapists are very busy nowadays, which is the reason I ask friends not only *what* they are doing but also *how* they are doing — both physically *and* psychologically.

V. The Reversal: We are bombarded with an overwhelming and incessant flood of depressing news from around the world every day, every hour, every minute. Nevertheless, despite the massive negatives, we are witnessing *simultaneously* a spectacular outpouring of every conceivable kind of individual doing caring Mitzvahs.

Personally, I do not believe that people are doing these acts of compassion as an antidote to **שיעמום**-*shi'amum*.

To the contrary, I believe they are sometimes rediscovering a fundamental goodness in their hearts and souls that — for a variety of reasons — may have been latent for a long time — even for many years.

The sheer number and vast range of the Mitzvahs is staggering, as well as the types and ages of the people engaged. They are the ones who, like the duck, have looked around themselves (often not very far), or by chance heard, read, saw, or experienced something that moved and stimulated them. As a reaction, they may have had a moment of personal enlightenment: What could *they themselves* do about not being stuck in a rut because of the virus, or because of their all-too-routine normal lifestyle before COVID?

Observing this Mitzvah-phenomenon, I began to categorize some historical and contemporary Mitzvahs according to the creativity of the Mitzvah projects, i.e., how many Mitzvah-people were involved in the doing/acting, and how many people benefited:

Category #1 Changing an entire society-HUGE:

The Pure Food and Drug Act (1906),

Womens' Suffrage 1920*

Native Americans received the right to vote in 1924,

Social Security (1935),

The Fair Labor Standards Act (FSLA) (1938)

including child labor laws,

Medicare (1964),

The Voting Rights Act of (1965),

The Freedom of Information Act (1966)

The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act (1966),

The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) (1967),

The Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990),

The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act (1996),

which frees a food donor from legal liability

Category #2 MEDIUM

(but only in comparison to the previous definition of “HUGE”):

A Bar Mitzvah project that rescued more than 1,000,000 pounds of food from Pinellas County, Florida's, public school cafeterias (*David Levitt*);

Songs of Love that has delivered 39,000+ individual songs to children with life-threatening diseases. songsoflove.org (*John Beltzer*);

a successful lawsuit brought against New York City to install curb cuts in every sidewalk (*labor lawyer Robert Stulberg*);

Rock and Wrap it Up!'s rescue of more than 1.1 billion pounds of food since 1991 rockandwrapitup.org (*Syd Mandelbaum*);

Amy's (annual) Holiday Party (*originally a Bat Mitzvah project 25 years ago*) for inner-city children 1995: 25 kids, 2019: 2,000 kids. cccprojects.org (*Amy Sacks Zeide*, and

Zoomers to (Baby) Boomers — 1,000 *teen-age* volunteers delivering critical food packages in 35 cities to 5,000 boomers. zoomerstoboomers.com

**Category #3 MISLABELLED SMALL [though there's really
no such thing as a small Mitzvah]**

**WHICH OUGHT TO,
OR MOST LIKELY WILL BECOME,
AT LEAST MEDIUM:**

Animal-human interaction:

Animal shelters *aggressively* providing pets for people who are especially lonely during the Virus-Days; bringing dogs, cats and *llamas!**** to nursing homes;

in addition to dogs, getting cats certified for visits in nursing homes, independent and assisted-living facilities, hospitals, Alzheimer's units, and hospice for people who are Cat People;

walking dogs for people who are no longer capable of doing it, but do not want to give up their pets, and

people buying dog and cat food for homeless peoples' dogs and cats. They are more than just pets. The animals are their best, and sometimes, their only friends.

In other areas of Mitzvahs:

People making 17, 81, 23, 150 masks at home;

highschool students playing music, singing, and entertaining in nursing homes;

synagogues and other non-profit and community venues

lending wheelchairs, crutches, and walkers for free, and

the great number of individuals from every status in society,

businesses, and corporations donating money for basic school supplies

for children from low-income families.

For so many of these projects — unlike the duck who may have to scan far into the distance — opportunities to participate in, or pioneer, a Mitzvah program, are everywhere. The majority are easily accessible in person, from conversations with friends, Mitzvah heroes, or from the Internet.

VI. An eloquent statement that goes to the heart of the matter:

That said, the powerful words of William Faulkner in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech are most appropriate:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

**Now, for those people who think I frequently make comparisons that are too far-fetched daring to substitute a thinking, soulful human being for a waddling, quacking creature — who am I to disagree with י"שׂר/Rashi, the greatest commentator on the Talmud?*

***In other countries: New Zealand — 1902, Australia — 1906, Finland — 1913, Norway, Denmark, Iceland — 1915, Canada — 1917, Russia — 1917, Great Britain — 1918, Switzerland — 1971, Kuwait — 2005, Saudi Arabia — 2011.*

****Llamas because of their gentle personalities, soft fur, and their long neck which allows them to bend their heads down to a bedridden resident.*

Living a Life of טוב

Alef – The Quotes

Some time ago, I chose to place on my title page these Biblical verses that were relevant to an anthology called “Doing Good”:

- A. **וַעֲשֵׂה-טוֹב-Do good. (Psalm 34:15),**
- B1. **בִּי-דַרְשׁוּ-טוֹב-Be On The Lookout For Doing Good (Amos 5:14),**
- B2. **בְּכִי-דַרְשׁוּ-טוֹב-Devote Yourselves To Doing Good (Amos 5:14),**
- C. **לִמְדוּ הַיָּטֵב-Learn Well To Do Good (Isaiah 1:17), and**
- D. **וְאַהֲבֵנוּ טוֹב-Love Good (Amos 5:15).**

Recently, having composed most of this manuscript, several things occurred to me – (1) In retrospect, the first quote — **וַעֲשֵׂה-טוֹב-Do good** — should have been sufficient. “Do good” — though I am still not certain if it should be read with a “.” period or “!” exclamation mark. (2) The phrase is brief, and simple to understand; but later I wondered about problems with its brevity and simplicity.* (3) I also repeatedly thought, “Well, of course. It’s obvious that doing good is that’s what people should be doing with their lives.”

Bet – The Numbers

The word **טוב/tov** appears in all its grammatical forms 576 times in the **תנ"ך/Tanach-Bible**. This staggering number indicates that in the Biblical mind, good, goodness, doing good, and the abstract “The Good” were central to, and very real in, the lives of the people. To gain a better understanding of this, there is definitely a need to elaborate.

I also scanned for how many times the root **דרש** appears in the **תנ"ך/Tanach-Bible**: 154. The **דרש** and **טוב** appear in the same verse 12 times. This admittedly unscientific review of the texts, nevertheless indicates a need for flexibility in order to reach a clear understanding of the meaning of both.

Gimel – The First Step

Quote C — **לִמְדוּ הַיָּטֵב-Learn Well To Do Good** — teaches that, while doing good might be a *natural* aspect of being human, there is a need to *study* the nature and varieties of good — and which kind of good — fits each individual *personally* provide the necessary guidance for each person as to how to act.

And I believe that quote D — **וְאַהֲבֵנוּ טוֹב-Love Good** — adds another very enlightening and crucial element to our personal relationship to **טוב**, namely, that it is not enough to *engage* in *doing* good, we ought to be passionate about what we are doing. By analogy, all aspects of two loving people would apply, for example: Constantly thinking of new ways to bring pleasure, putting one’s entire being into the acts of goodness, and speaking in praise of good, goodness, doing good and the abstract “The Good” about the beloved.

Dalet – Why Two Translations of the Same Verse in Amos 5:14?

I struggled to select an accurate translation of **דרשו** in B1 — **בִּי-דַרְשׁוּ-טוֹב-Be On The Lookout For Doing Good** — and B2 — **בְּכִי-דַרְשׁוּ-טוֹב-Devote Yourselves To Doing Good**. The best I could do was offer two different possibilities that I already knew. These two added to *doing* and *loving*, important elements of actively *scanning your personal view of the world and Life to discover new and better ways to do good*, and *devotion, a more intense relationship than just a casual interest to good*.

As mentioned above, I scanned for how many times **דרש** appears in the **תנ"ך/Tanach-Bible**: 154.

To complete my preparation, I then consulted the standard Biblical dictionary, the “BDB”: *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* by **Brown, Driver, and Briggs** about the root **דרש**. It offered seven major categories of translation, with several variations under each heading. This is some of them (besides a number of others of my own): Pay attention to, inquire of, inquire about, require, apply oneself, reach out to (God), investigate/

grill witnesses, *study, practice, enact, care for, consult*, seek (God), resort to, demand, request, turn your attention to, pursue, *be devoted to* (as quoted above), always be conscious of***. And important to note: The BDB lists close to 100 verses to substantiate each of these definitions. A few are covered in the verses above, but to summarize about living the טוב Life, I mention only this very small selection of verses:

I. The last verse in the Book of Esther:

Mordechai, now second only to King Achashevayrosh, was

דָּרַשׁ טוֹב לְעַמּוֹ

(using his exalted position,)
acted for the good of his people.

II. The often-quoted line from the prophet Micah (6:8):

הִגִּיד לְךָ אֲדָם מֵהֵטוֹב
וּמֵהֵיחֹה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ
כִּי אִם־עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט
...וְאַהֲבַת הַדָּד

“He (God) has told you, O human being, what is good,
And what the LORD requires of you:
Only to make Justice a reality
And to love Goodness...

III. Isaiah 1:17:

לִמְדוּ הֵיטֵב
דַּרְשׁוּ מִשְׁפָּט...
שִׁפְטוּ יְתוֹם
רִיבוֹ אֶלְמָנָה:

Learn to do good.
Devote yourselves to justice;...
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow.

IV. Psalm 34:15:

סוּר מִרַע וְעֲשֵׂה־טוֹב

Shun evil
and do good,

V. Amos 5:1

שְׂנֹא־רָע וְאַהֲבוּ טוֹב

Hate evil
and love good.

VI Isaiah 5:20

הוֹי
הָאֹמְרִים
לְרַע טוֹב
וְלְטוֹב רָע

Woe
to those
who call evil good
and good evil.

Hay — Sixty Years Ago

In 1962, I began studying at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. My first exposure to high-level **תנ"ך/Tanach-Bible** studies was with a young professor in his mid-20's, Shalom Paul. Over the years, we stayed in touch, even after he accepted a position at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I visited him there during my summers, often having lunch and friendly conversation...but always as his student.

He was 84 when he passed away in 2020, **מנוחתו עדן/menuchato Eden-May his soul eternally rest peacefully in the Garden of Eden**), finishing his career as Chairman of the Department of **תנ"ך/Tanach**.****

In 1991, he published a monumental commentary to the Book of **עמוס-Amos**.***** In Chapter 5, By analyzing the use of **דרש**, he insightfully connects **טוב** to God, Menschlichkeit, and Life itself. and Life in the Biblical/Jewish consciousness:

In verse 4:

כִּי כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה
לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל
דַּרְשׁוּנִי וְחִיּוּ:

Thus said God

To the House of Israel:

Seek Me, and you will live.

And then in verse 14:

דַּרְשׁוּ טוֹב
וְאַל תִּרְעוּ לְמַעַן תַּחֲיוּ
וְיִהְיֶיכוֹן יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת אִתְּכֶם
כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתֶּם:

Seek good and not evil,

That you may live,

And that the God the God of Hosts,

May truly be with you.

I would phrase it this way: If you want to find the Source***** for the reason why you are alive, and want to know how to have significance in this marvelous reality, Life — **דַּרְשׁוּ טוֹב** — seek out, learn about, be constantly on the look-out for opportunities to devote yourself to **טוב/doing good**.

What Amos is telling the Jews, if you want to reach out to and have a connection with God, and thereby have a meaningful human existence the way to do it is **דַּרְשׁוּ טוֹב**.

**For example, "Just do it" campaigns such as for quitting an addiction succeed only a certain percentage of the time. An exception is General/President Eisenhower: At one point he smoked as much as four packs a day. As the historical record relates, in 1949 he ordered himself to stop, and indeed quit.*

***The root **דרש** appears in the Babylonian Talmud 2,658 times, but there it is mostly applied to derivation of new ideas and laws from **תנ"ך/Tanach-Bible**, interpretation of Biblical texts according to specific rules the sages had developed, and a Torah-lesson delivered in public. Nowadays it is applied to sermons.*

****Many synagogues have a framed print on their walls called a **שויתי/Shiviti**. They are the first words in Psalm 16:8: **שׁוֹיְתִי יְהוָה לְנִגְדֵי תָמִיד**—I am ever mindful of God's Presence. The print is often decorated with several quotes and Kabbalistic combinations of letters. Some have the quote inscribed above the Ark.*

*****The Yehezkel Kaufmann Professor Emeritus of Bible Studies at the university.*

******Fortress Press.*

******For agnostics or atheists substitute "source" with a small "s".*

23. Maimonides Explains the Jewish Position on “Beggars {‘People in need’} Can’t Be Choosers.”

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ

Love others as you love yourself.*(*Leviticus 19:18*)

is overquoted and often erroneously cited as being the essence-and-entirety of religion. But the original meaning is not so simple, particularly for Biblical scholars. The syntax and precise definition of all three words (e.g., לְרֵעֶךָ) allow for several possibilities.** Teachers, high school seniors in their essays on their college applications quote it. Rabbis, ministers, priests, snake-handling preachers, a mere 20-30 miles off of Interstate 95 between Washington and Richmond, have given sermons based on the verse. All of them — perhaps not as numerous as the stars in the heavens, but close — have done it.

I want to work with an easy-to-understand positive application of the quote. In Maimonides’ *Sefer HaMitzvot*, the work in which he enumerates all 613 Mitzvot in the Torah, loving others is *Positive Mitzvah #206*:

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ

“Love others as you love yourself.”

וכל מה-שארצה לעצמי ארצה לו כמוהו

**Whatever I want for myself,
I want the same for that other person.**

וכל-מה-שלא ארצה לעצמי ולידידי

לא ארצה לו בשבילו כמוהו

והוא אמרו יתעלה ואהבת לרעך כמוך

**And whatever I do not want for myself or my friends,
I do not want for that other person.**

This is the meaning of the verse,

“And you shall love the other person as yourself.” (*Leviticus 19:18*)

Several points:

1. Living Jewishly is all about *action*. Exactly how are we supposed to do *act*?
2. In fact, the root **אהב/Aleph-Hay-Bet** in the **תנ"ך /Tanach-Bible** had at least as much an action-oriented meaning as the modern-day usage expressing an emotion.
3. Leviticus 19:18 does not teach exactly *what to do* to bring this high-sounding verse into in our lives.
4. However – since Maimonides’ statement is one of my favorite guide-texts for the *actual* giving of **צדקה/Tzedakah** and performing acts of **גְּמִילוּת הַסְּדִים/Gemillut Chassadim** — I consider it a crucial point of departure, guide, and stimulus when individuals are considering *exactly* what to do for others with their **צדקה/Tzedakah** money, time, effort, stamina, creativity, and talents.
5. **Pedagogically and from a practical standpoint, it is critical to be very specific.** This is what usually happens when I teach it:
I ask, **“What do you want for yourself?”**
 - The response, **“Food.”**
 - **Too general:** You want
 - *plentiful food, nutritious food, uncontaminated food, affordable food,*
 - *and fun, “comfort food”, i.e., food lacking absolutely any nutritional value*
 - *when you just need a psychological lift.*
 - I ask: **What do you want for yourself?**
 - The response **“Clothing.”**

- ~~The response, “Clothing.”~~
- **Too general:** You want
clothes that fit,
interview-for-jobs clothes, work clothes,
clothes for Shabbat and holidays
pajamas for the kids (when sexist thinking was in vogue):
astronauts/princesses/flowers patterns for the girls;
astronauts/wookies/sharks patterns for the boys)
- *prom dresses,*
- *fancier clothes for your daughter’s graduation*
- *from a synagogue religious school or day school,*
- *Best Talmud Student Award in hand*
- I ask: **What do you want for yourself?**
- The Response, **“Shelter.”**
- **Too general:** You want
to live in affordable, safe housing,
near the right public schools or Jewish dayschools,
near the right synagogue, or
close to doctors, urgent care facilities, and hospitals
a home where the price of utilities is not prohibitive,
making your home unbearable in winter and summer,
where the pictures on the walls are to your personal liking, and
where you personally chose the colors of the paint for the walls
and the design for the comforter on the bed.
- I ask: **“What do you want for yourself?”**
- The response, **“Work”:**
- **Too General** — you want
a reliable vehicle or
nearby inexpensive public transportation
useful, meaningful, fulfilling work
with reasonable hours
a boss who not only guides you,
but also treats you with dignity and cares about you

As for the Rambam’s negative — “what we *don’t* want for ourselves” — we should also require similar detailed analysis.

Since I take Maimonides’ profound insight seriously, it should be abundantly clear that when the Rambam says, “want” for the other, person it means ***we have to do something to make it happen.*** Two examples should suffice:

I. If we want infants to be safe in our vehicles, then Jewish agencies, synagogues, youth groups, and concerned individuals should prioritize conducting relatively easy infant car seat drives to gather the old ones that still meet federal standards. Also to we should use a portion of our Tzedakah money to purchase new ones to be delivered to agencies and Mitzvah heroes who will distribute them efficiently and wisely.

II. Because I have diabetes, I take a combination of three medications. And because of Medicare, all of my medications, except one, are very reasonably priced. I am lucky because of Medicare; others are not so fortunate. The following story is from one of the Mitzvah heroes, Washingtonian **Igor Feldblyum:**

*Originally from St. Petersburg, Russia, he established **Am Echad (amechad.net)**, a non-profit organization to provide for vulnerable elderly Jews in the city where he was born. He has a person on the ground in St. Petersburg who makes the rounds, locates the people and their needs, and Igor provides the funds. One such situation concerned a woman with diabetes who lived in an apartment building where there was a street-level*

pharmacy. She told Igor's contact, "*Sometimes I go by the pharmacy and look at my medications.*"

Not only for me personally, but for anyone hearing this shocking story, we should be motivated to insure that a person such as Igor has enough Tzedakah money to distribute to provide for as many people as possible. And the larger message is: By as many ways as possible, we ought to establish a system of equitable health care for everyone – in St. Petersburg, in our own country, everywhere. That is how I understand the concept of צדק/*Tzedek-Justice*, creating a fair, just society.

While I do not mean to imply that Maimonides' words are the end-all criterion for Mitzvah decisions, nevertheless I believe that fundamentally they are the best ones to give us practical guidance in our Mitzvah efforts.

**Nowhere in the תנ"ך/Tanach or the Talmud is Leviticus 19:18 referred to as "The Golden Rule".*

***The best and most thorough analysis of אֶתְהַבֵּת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ is by Rabbi Jacob Milgrom (Anchor Bible, Leviticus).*

24. Mitzvah-Hyphens:

How We Can Expand Our Mitzvah-Consciousness And Vary, Improve, and Increase Our Mitzvah-Actions

(ALEPH) Making your list:

All you have to do is put the word Mitzvah and a hyphen before another word [e.g., Mitzvah-keyboard], or write down another word, then hyphen, then Mitzvah(s) [e.g., roadtrip-Mitzvah(s)].

That's it.

Almost any word can be combined with the word "Mitzvah" by using a hyphen. By making this compound word, you are endowing a common object with the potential to be used for Mitzvahs.

If you think about it, it really is awesome that any individual has the power to take everyday objects, moments, experiences, or emotions, and to raise them to the higher, more sublime realm of Mitzvahs — doing good for others.

Below is a list I composed. More than half of the items came to mind in one sitting. The rest occurred to me, one or a few at a time, over the next several days. I also asked friends for suggestions.

Make your own list. Most of all, while composing your list, enjoy recognizing how much Mitzvah-potential there is everywhere around you.

(BET) Possibly Helpful suggestions:

(1) Start with ones that you think of spontaneously — *whatever* comes to mind.

(2) In addition to any *things*, include places, people, ideals, dreams, accidents, and serendipitous or significant moments in your life.

(3) *Immediately* jot down new ones as you think of them or discover others.

(4) For some people, it helps to keep pen and paper near the shower, bathtub, and bed, because, being so relaxed from the bath or shower, or in the moments of falling asleep or waking up (even before the first slurp of caffeine) you might think of other Mitzvahs. Naturally, note pads and pens should also be clearly visible on kitchen counters, by the washer and dryer, the dining room table, and in the car (*not* when you're driving). Colored or Dayglo note pads would be especially helpful. Nowadays — make the list on your

phone and transcribe it later.

(5) Use the dictionary, thesaurus, Internet, Biblical texts, Talmud, Midrash, Halachah, sermons, **תורה דברי/Divray Torah**, family photographs, popular songs, commercials, Internet, print, dictionaries, encyclopedias, radio and TV advertisements with their jingles and tag lines, jokes, paintings, prints, posters and billboards, charts and statistics, videos and YouTube segments, social media, games, highschool and college class notes, nursery rhymes, unforgettable jump rope rhythmic rhyming lines you remember from childhood, love letters, personal diaries, and any books in your library including poetry (even limericks), novels, plays, medical-school and law-school textbooks, and picture- and coffee-table-books — *any* possible resource to discover words to hyphenate with the word “Mitzvahs”.

(6) Watch a movie about spelling bees such as “Akeelah and The Bee”.

(7) Throughout the day, be on the lookout for more Mitzvah-hyphens.

(8) Review and work at your list *only* once a day — except for momentary flashes — every day, six days, for one week.

(9) Don’t hesitate to freely associate *anything* and *everything*.

(10) Do not be concerned if some of your initial Mitzvah-choices seem unreasonable, unrealistic, ridiculous, *possibly* impossible, or awkward to you.

(11) When in doubt — put it on the list.

(12) Colloquialisms, bad grammar, slang, quotes (“day of infamy”, “We shall overcome”, “Just do it”, and foreign words and phrases are all acceptable.

(13) Obscenities and actions that would humiliate other people *are strictly prohibited*.

(14) There are no grades or exams. You’re too old for that *mishigoss*.

(GIMEL) A sample Mitzvah-hyphen list (with my occasional annotations):

Mitzvah-opportunity, mis-labeled-“small”-Mitzvahs, butterfly-Mitzvahs, Mitzvah-money, Mitzvah-parent, Mitzvah-spouse, Mitzvah-family, baby-Mitzvahs, diaper-Mitzvahs, Mitzvah-**הכברה/chevra**, Mitzvah-hero, Mitzvah-teacher, Mitzvah-student, Mitzvah-miracles, click!-Mitzvahs, don’t-click!-Mitzvahs, Mitzvah-legislation, Mitzvah-finches, -parakeets, -love birds*, Dollar Store-Mitzvahs, Mitzvah-job, job-Mitzvahs, Mitzvah-trends, Mitzvah-failures, Mitzvah-hug, Mitzvah-kiss, Mitzvah-treat, Mitzvah-leftovers, repeat-Mitzvahs, duct-tape-Mitzvahs, caffeine-Mitzvahs, Mitzvah-decaf, Mitzvah-fire.

(DALET) Next:

By now, you are ready to begin to edit your list, and have no doubt realized that there are apparently endless numbers and varieties of Mitzvahs from which to choose.

Don’t feel overwhelmed.

(HAY) Next:

NOW STOP! Otherwise, there’s no end to the list. I suggest the following *practical* plan for considering where you, me, or anyone’s time, genetic makeup, unique personality and talents, physical, mental, and emotional constitution, energy, and Tzedakah-money will have the greatest impact:

(I) At the end of your week,
sift through your results
and eliminate those
that *seem to you* to be
too extreme, impractical, far-fetched, or outrageous.

(II) Wait one more day,
then read your entire refined Mitzvah-list
out loud

to yourself, a friend, or group of friends.

This is *your* list.

(III) While reading and reviewing the list,
*focus on the ones that **really** resonate with you
and appeal to you personally.*

Hopefully, you will be *realistically* stimulated to begin *doing* even more, greater, and more effective Mitzvahs in addition to the ones you are already doing.

(VAV) If you are so inclined:

Feel free to do the same exercise in Hebrew, using the unique grammatical form of Hebrew for hyphens..

Expect some exciting new results.

**For individuals living alone or residents of nursing homes or assisted-living facilities.*

The Restaurant of Broken Dreams

**It came to seem that
wherever he went
everything was broken.
Even when he chanced upon a place,
it was a matter of most everything in pieces,
the largest thing still whole being no bigger than a vase
or a small handbag without a tear or scratch.
As he spoke to people,
he heard then, too, lines like,
“This is the street of broken dreams.”
“This is the restaurant of broken dreams.”
“There is the car of broken dreams.”
And so he set himself to find the best carpenters,
experts in porcelain and ceramics, insulation and leather,
people who knew how to mend garden hoses
as well as surgeons fixed arteries, plumbers.
He learned each trade in turn
and drew each of his teachers and students and friends
strangers, even, into
what came to be known as
The Great Fixing in the Land.
And when he died,
bits and splinters had become endangered species;
Little children with glue and tape and nails in their hands
surrounded his bed and promised to carry on his work,
and their parents awoke each morning,
their dreams still whole.**

25. No ברכה/Bracha-Blessing for צדקה/Tzedakah

There is something strange and unexplained about **צדקה/Tzedakah** – at least as far as I can tell — and for which I haven't found a specific Jewish answer in the sources:

There is no **ברכה/Bracha-blessing** prescribed before performing the Mitzvah of **צדקה/Tzedakah**, in Maimonides, the Shulchan Aruch, or other law codes.

A. So many things Jews do are preceded by a **ברכה/Bracha-blessing**: *haMotzi*, *Kiddush*, lighting Chanukkah candles, a *Bris*, hanging a *Mezuzah*, and on an abundance of important Life-occasions to recite **שהחיינו/Shehecheyanu**.

B. There are some that are recited *after* the act, such as **ברכת המזון/Birkat haMazon** *after* a meal (naturally) and

I think especially think of the four categories of people listed in the Talmud who have survived dangerous situations, among them those returning from a sea journey or others released from captivity, a hostage situation, or prison. (We could certainly add many more physically dangerous situations today.) After these difficult times, the people go to synagogue and recites the **ברכת הגומל/Birkat HaGomel**, thanking God for having taken care of them, and keeping them alive.

C. There *are* a few Mitzvahs for which there is no **ברכה/Bracha** which are understandable, such as for honoring parents because it is an all-the-time Mitzvah. But for **צדקה/Tzedakah** - I can only theorize.

D. Here a few suggestions as to why *in general* there is no **ברכה/Bracha** for performing acts of **צדקה/Tzedakah**. Some of these I learned from teachers, friends, and students:

1. With **צדקה/Tzedakah**, a person can't afford to waste any time, even a moment, because of the recipient's possible extreme dire physical or psychological need. You just never know when someone is close to despair or even (**חס ושלום/chass veShalom-God forbid!**) dying. Just think of rescue teams — their vehicles' sirens screaming and multiple lights flashing — speeding down the road, running red lights, to emergency room medical teams making split-second life-and-death decisions. Some Mitzvahs have to be done that quickly, and because *sometimes* we have to react and act so fast, we have to train ourselves to be ready to react and act so fast *always*. Even if we have to eliminate the **ברכה/Bracha-blessing**.

2. Similarly, any hesitation or delay — even for a few seconds — may cause embarrassment to the recipient.

3. Some have said that if you make the **ברכה/Bracha** and the other person refuses to take the Tzedakah — as sometimes happens — the **ברכה/Bracha** will have become what is known in the Talmud as a **ברכה לבטלה/Bracha leVatalah-a wasted blessing**, an unnecessary use of God's name.

4. This Mitzvah-act is so directly human-being-to-human-being, no interruption should be tolerated so the person giving **צדקה/Tzedakah** can focus 100% on the fact he or she is facing another human being. It connects us and reminds us of our shared commonality.

5. Another is that the act exudes a sense of God's Intimate Presence in the World — there is something so exquisite, so awesome, i.e., the **זיו/Ziv-radiance** of Mitzvahs, that there is no real need to make a **ברכה/Bracha-blessing** to become aware of God's Presence.

6. From my great-niece Sarah: Mitzvah or not, it's a nice thing to do, so it isn't necessary to bless the act. This one, I think is related to the fact that we are made in the image of God, and we are clearly acting in a very God-like manner when we do good for others. In my opinion, doing **צדקה/Tzedakah** in and of itself reminds us why we are here on this earth and were given the gift of life — to do Mitzvahs.

That is why “selfless” is not a good Mitzvah-word in English. When we perform acts of **צדקה/Tzedakah** and other Mitzvahs we do not diminish or *lose* our Self. Very

... of the *תורה* and other *מצוות*, we do not diminish or lose our sense. Very much to the contrary, we clarify, define, and gain a truer sense of who we really are – namely, Mitzvah-people.

All of these are good possibilities, and some are very appealing, but I am still wondering why in the 20 volumes of my huge Talmud, and 24 volumes of Maimonides Mishneh Torah, and 10 even larger-size volumes of the Shulchan Aruch Code of Jewish Law, and the centuries of their commentators' notes, there is nothing *definitely* prescribed by our tradition for making a *ברכה/Bracha* before performing the Mitzvah of *צדקה/Tzedakah*.

Nevertheless, as you can see from my list, it is most worthwhile to think about it because it may lead to some very important insights about Life, Judaism, God, and about ourselves as Jews and human beings.

And while we haven't "cracked" the mystery of no Bracha for doing *צדקה/Tzedakah* in our Torah-research leaving us somewhat unsettled, my old friend and *מורי/Mori-My Torah-teacher* Rabbi Michael Klayman, offered this meaningful insight:

There should be a *ברכה/Bracha* after you have done the act of *צדקה/Tzedakah*. In that *ברכה/Bracha* we would thank God for the power, resources, time, health, inclination, motivation, and inspiration to do it and to live up fully to ourselves, to fulfill the meaning of being human in our own lives. It would be consciously taking note – even with the simplest and smallest act of *צדקה/Tzedakah* – of how grand, no – how truly awesome – it is to be human and to be allowed the privilege and power to make such a difference in the lives of others.

26. Some Things I Missed Early on in the Pandemic

I. (A Text I Discussed in Another Dvar Torah)

רבי יוחנן חלש
על לגביה רבי חנינא
אמר ליה
חביבין עליך יסורין
אמר ליה
לא הן ולא שכון
אמר ליה
הב לי ירך
יהב ליה ידיה
ואוקמיה

רבי יוחנן/Rabbi Yochanan* became ill.

רבי חנינא/Rabbi Chanina went to visit him.

He [Rabbi Chanina] said to him:

“Do you appreciate your suffering?”

He [Rabbi Yochanan] answered,

“Neither them, nor their reward”.**

He [Rabbi Chanina] said,

“Give me your hand.”

He [Rabbi Yochanan] gave him his hand,

and he [Rabbi Chanina] raised him from his sickbed. (*Brachot 5b*)

II. The First Thing I Missed

This text only states that Rabbi Yochanan was “ill”. This seemed strange to me, since the Talmud has terms for different degrees of illness including “seriously ill” and

SINCE THE TALMUD HAS TERMS FOR SEVERAL DEGREES OF ILLNESS INCLUDING SERIOUSLY ILL AND **סוּסָה/gosays-close to death**. I had always imagined the scenario dealt at least with serious, if not critical, sickness. The fact that the words transmitted in this Midrash have only recorded “ill”, apparently seems to imply that, as far as the Mitzvah of **בְּקוּר חוֹלִים/bikkur cholim-visiting people who are sick** is concerned, it applies even to mild fever, indisposition, or even “feeling out of sorts”. That should resonate with many of us, because — with so many people involved in busy lives, sometimes we adjust our schedules to visit only when we hear words like “stage four”, “chemotherapy”, “stent”, “bypass”, or “biopsy” from a relative, friend, acquaintance, and, in some situations, a stranger.

This is particularly relevant in our Days of the Plague. Though we have had widespread viruses in the past (the 1918-1919 flu, SARS, AIDS, etc.), we are untutored in:

*lockdowns,
haywire stock markets,
cancelled sports events, cruises, flights, and concerts,
museum closings like where I live in Washington —
not getting to see the Hope diamond,
the original Declaration of Independence in the National Archives,
or to gaze in awe at Henry, the 11-ton elephant in the Smithsonian —
surgical gloves,
multiple 20-second daily handwashings,
reports, statistics, and multi-colored charts of the ratio
of deaths to people testing positive.*

Six months ago, none of us would have thought that a severe interruption in our daily routines would apply to us. As people call, send e-mails, type texts on cellphones, Zoom, Facetime, and Facebook with us, we do the same for them. Our “normal schedule” has been set aside while we receive and communicate messages of “just checking up on how you are doing physically and emotionally”.

The Mitzvah of **בְּקוּר חוֹלִים/bikkur cholim** discussed above, calls to mind another example of “missing” something. Near universally quoted is the Halachah that says that the laws of Shabbat and holidays are suspended — if it is a case of **פִּיקוּחַ נֶפֶשׁ/pikuach nefesh** — life-threatening. The *actual* Halachah is **פִּיקוּחַ נֶפֶשׁ סַפֵּק/safek pikuach nefesh**, i.e., even if we are not certain if it is possibly life-threatening. The meaning in our COVID days is obvious.

III. The Second Thing I Missed: The Two Rabbis

I believe it is crucial to know who these two specific Rabbis were. Determining that detail, we have to consider many factors:

(1) For centuries, there were only handwritten manuscripts of the Talmud, which contained, quite naturally, many mistakes, particularly with Greek or Persian words or Rashi’s Old French that the scribe did not understand;

(2) Even the best scribe copying more than 5,000 pages has to make occasional or frequent errors, particularly if he or she thought that something didn’t make sense. So the scribe made a change — and the errors kept repeating themselves;

(3) Then, post-Gutenberg, there were printed books of Talmud, though the transcribers or typesetters might have added more misreadings or mistakes due to, among other reasons, the poor handwriting of the manuscript, or the scribes changed words because they didn’t understand the text, or they “corrected” previous “corrections”, or did not understand foreign words. So they re-copied the mistakes, only this time in print, or introduced new ones;

(4) After that came support-volumes — complex lists, indexes, archeological photographs and sketches, charts, time lines, encyclopedias, concordances;

(5) Then came the CD-ROMs, amazingly simple objects weighing maybe a few

grams, that contained unbelievable quantities of Jewish text, plus scanning and copying capabilities that were dazzlingly revolutionary only 10 years before;

(6) Inevitably, the Internet expanded the number and accessibility of more texts, such as can be found on *Sefaria's* website — the largest collection of Jewish texts, *ever*,

(7) And finally, the ultimate resource — Rabbi Doctor Many-Times-Honorary-Doctor Professor Yitzchak HaKohayn Google.

Again, I almost missed a critical element in this chain of accuracy of the text: Those blessed select few Great Ones who have all the material — and the ability for instant recall — in their own minds. I studied formally with one of them, my Rebbe, the late Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, ז"ל, and for years I have had an annual Kiddush lunch in Jerusalem with another: Rabbi Daniel Sperber.

Long ago, having rejected the naïve thought that the Talmudic rabbis were monoliths of genius —

(a) equals in superb intellectual gifts, i.e., experts in all areas of memory and teaching Torah,

(b) a thorough knowledge of all of the relevant material,

(c) identical personality traits,

(d) and, ultimately, every one of them, a *Mensch* — I wanted to make certain that I didn't miss anything again. I needed some biographical details of these two *unique* individuals.

I already knew some of the bare facts about these two Talmudic Rabbis. In the late Third Century CE, Rabbi Yochanan* was the true giant; it is estimated that he is quoted a thousand times in both the Babylonian Talmud and Yerushalmi-The Talmud of The Land of Israel, and one of his students was Rabbi Chanina. And as some scholars note, though later Rabbi Chanina became Rabbi Yochanan's **תלמיד חבר/Talmid-Chaver-student-colleague**, he was still one level in rank below Rabbi Yochanan.

Once you determine which of the Rabbi Chaninas in the Talmud is the right one, you have the key to my "missed" insight.

Rabbi Chanina was certainly a prominent, and undoubtedly a well-respected, sage in his day. Yet, in relation to Rabbi Yochanan — who was *the* pre-eminent Torah genius of his generation, I'm thinking that comparing the two rabbis resembles a comparison of Leonard Bernstein or George Gershwin to Mozart. Having recognized this relationship between the two, I am absolutely astonished that Rabbi Chanina had the power to heal Rabbi Yochanan. And even more, that *perhaps unexpectedly to Rabbi Chanina*, he did, in fact, heal him. Rabbi Chanina only knew that he *had to* perform the Mitzvah of **בִּיקּוּר חוֹלִים/bikkur cholim** and *he did what he did because he had to*. Quite simply, it was a Mitzvah.

IV. The Torah we might learn from this:

First of all, we should not shy away from a Mitzvah-opportunity even if there exists an enormous gap in status, ethical reputation (*Menschlichkeit*), fame, wealth, talent (*i.e.*, merely "talented" vs. "genius"), or any other factor that would keep us from performing the Mitzvah. And second, let us remember that — so many of the great Mitzvah-programs that have been developed that healed thousands, sometimes millions, of people — began with a bar or bat Mitzvah kid who was undaunted or, as some have put it, "too dumb to know" that you can't do it.

For the select courageous few who can do as Rabbi Chanina did, let us hope that they — and many more — appear on the horizon and in the media — because of their inspiring actions —

בִּמְהֵרָה בִּימֵינוּ/bimhayrah biyamaynu-soon, very soon. Amen.

*This is not Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai who lived at the time of the Destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

**Many, though not all, Talmudic sages believed that suffering "works off" punishment for sins. In *The Future World*, a person's days would, therefore, be easier.

27. פיינשמעקער/*Feinshmecker-Mitzvahs*

(*Aleph*) *A linguistic comparison:* It must have happened sometime during one of my summers in Israel. Someone on an English TV channel used the word *connoisseur* (from the French *connoistre-to know*). I was curious to learn what the Hebrew term was, so I asked a young צבר/*sabra*. His answer was “פיינשמעקער/*feinshmecker*” — a Yiddish word!

I was surprised, since the Hebrew dictionary has some fine Semitic-root terms, such as these: מומחה/*mumchah*, *mumchah*, בקיאה-בקי/*bakki-beki'ah*, מבינה-מבין/*mayveen-meveenah*, and ידענית-ידען/*yad'an-yad'anit* — all of them meaning “expert”. Contrasting the Hebrew and English/French with פיינשמעקער/*feinshmecker*, I began to think that the French word was somehow inadequate since it only implied “getting it” through the brain.

Now, let me break down the word פיינשמעקער/*feinshmecker* into its two parts: פיין/*fein*-“fine”, שמעקן/*shmecken*-“to smell”, “whiff” as in “שמעק טאבאק/*a shmeck tabak-a pinch of snuff*”, and “taste” as in “געשמאק/*geshmack*-“delicious”. Aside from just loving the sound of the word פיינשמעקער/*feinshmecker*, I immediately recognized that the word פיינשמעקער/*feinshmecker* was superior compared to *connoisseur* because of its elements of smell and taste. The French term only emphasizes the brain.

(*Bet*) *Comparing and contrasting “connoisseur” and “פיינשמעקער/*feinshmecker*”:*

(*A*) *Yuppy uppity abuse of the connoisseur concept:* Picture this — In an elegant restaurant, a yuppy, trying to impress his date, orders a bottle of *pinot grigio* Mouton Ploni 2011. An impeccably dressed *sommelier** pours three ounces in his glass. Monsieur Yuppy, allows it to breathe for the requisite number of seconds, sniffs it quietly, rolls it over his tongue and around his cheeks for 10 seconds, then — and only then — swallows. Pausing briefly, Monsieur Yuppy proclaims that it has a hint of loganberries and elm bark and faint floral notes of anthuriums. Then he adds that the 2008 vintage had greater depth. Analysis: His פיינשמעקערקייט/*feinshmeckerkeit* was not pure; it was merely a tool for his brain’s predetermined intellectual pseudo-connoisseurship.**

(*B*) *Aroma #1 — Thanksgiving, Arlington, Virginia:* During my years at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, I often brought home some classmates for Thanksgiving because they lived too far away from their own families. While in their minds they knew that we were going to enjoy a fine meal in a few hours, once we got in the door, as soon as they smelled the turkey, sweet potatoes, pumpkin and apple pies, you could readily see a beatific look on their faces. Decades later, they would recall that aroma.

(*C*) *Aroma #2 — Denver: Daddy Bruce’s very טרייף/trayf-non-Kosher ribs*

You could smell them emanating from Daddy Bruce’s barbecue two blocks away.

Of all the Mitzvah heroes I have met, Daddy Bruce Randolph was one of the most endearing. Sweet and innocent at 89 when I met him (though he looked only 60), he grew up poor***, and I doubt that even at age 89 he had any money in the bank. But every Thanksgiving and Christmas, hundreds of poor people from all over Denver knew that they would sit down to a free royal feast at Daddy Bruce’s.

I imagine that a person as far away as #28 or #47 in line savored the sweet aroma coming from the kitchen and dining room; and I can also imagine their mouths probably beginning to water in anticipation, no matter how long it might take for them to eventually sit down and eat.

In addition, taxi drivers, their meters turned off, delivered dinners to people who were unable to get to Daddy Bruce’s Barbecue on their own.

It was obvious that *everyone* loved Daddy Bruce.

In 1985, the University of Colorado bestowed on Daddy Bruce an Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters.

When he died at 94, the Denver Broncos paid for Daddy Bruce's funeral, the mayor eulogized him, and the street was re-named Bruce Randolph Avenue.

And no doubt long into the future, many old timers would still describe the aroma as "divine" and "heavenly".

(Gimel) A new term for making others' lives better – פיינשמעקער/Feinshmecker-Mitzvahs: Most Mitzvah-oriented people *see* or *hear about* opportunities for Mitzvahs. Now, though, I think it would be good if all of us refined our desire to do good by sniffing them out or sensing a taste in our mouths that there is some good for us to do that we might have missed if we relied only on our eyes, ears, and brain.*****

I have mentioned the sense of sight, hearing, smell, and taste, the fifth — touch — should help expand our Mitzvah-awareness even more. My father, Dr. Julius Siegel (**מנוחתו עדין/menuchato Eden-May his soul eternally rest peacefully in the Garden of Eden**), was an osteopathic physician in Northern Virginia for almost half a century. His practice included both general MD medicine and osteopathy, the manipulation of bones to relieve the body of certain illnesses. I once asked him about when he twisted a patient's neck*****, how did he know that there wasn't a small fracture under the skin, muscle, and fat, and that the force of his twisting wouldn't paralyze the patient? Without the least hint of condescension, his answer was that *his fingers knew*.

(Dalet) To summarize: I believe that there are a great number of Mitzvahs waiting to happen and which we can do if we use the פיינשמעקער/*feinshmecker* method rather than relying only on our minds. And while I do not expect us to have something like my father's degree of physical sensitivity, *any* extension of our powers to do Mitzvahs is desirable. As with פיינשמעקער/*feinshmecker* vs. *connoisseur*, we should be aware that the response to smell and taste often precedes the formation of thoughts. Perhaps, if we transfer our memories of the smell and taste of a delicious meal to doing Mitzvahs, we will have accomplished that much more towards making the lives of other people better.

(Hay) Addendum: Who knows? Maybe even the fire of a great jalapeño-laced barbecue sauce or the tingle in the nose and on the tongue from an ice cold Diet Dr. Pepper on a scorching, humid summer day in Washington, or the sweet bitterness of a sip of Rwandan coffee, may lead us to more Mitzvahs.

You just never know.

**An extremely pale imitation of Pharaoh's cupbearer.*

***I have been informed that this is often the intended negative connotation in contemporary Israeli usage, just like in story (A).*

****In a radio interview, Daddy Bruce recalled that when he was a child, Santa Claus came to everyone else's house, but never came to his family's home.*

*****Aromas go directly to the soul is expressed in the Talmud (Brachot 43b):*

אָמַר רַב זְוֹטְרָא בְּרַ טוֹבִיָּה אָמַר רַב
אֵיזָהוּ דְּבַר שְׁהַנְּשָׂמָה נְהֵינִית מִמֶּנּוּ
וְאִין הַגּוֹף נְהֵנָה מִמֶּנּוּ
'הָיִי אוֹמֵר: זֶה הָרִיחַ'

Mar Zutra bar Tuvia said in the name of Rav...

What do we know that the soul enjoys but not the body?

It is the sense of smell.

******as he did to mine on three or four occasions.*

28. An Astonishing And Difficult Jewish Text

(Aleph) Action: Jewish tradition stresses the priority of *doing* Mitzvahs, i.e., doing good for others over intellectual thinking and emotional motivations. A classic example (*Midrash Psalms 118:17*) lists the six questions individuals will be asked after their earthly existence has ended.* The correct answers will allow them to enter The Next World: Feeding hungry people, giving water to those who are thirsty, clothing those who have none or little, raising orphans, using a percentage of their money for Tzedakah, and employing some of their time, energy, and talents for *Gemillut Chassadim*, deeds of caring, loving kindness — all *actions*.

(Bet) There are many reasons why people give their money to Tzedakah: Some do it for the pure goodness of it, the **זיו/Ziv-radiance** of the Mitzvah, and the benefits and relief to others. Some other reasons include: tax deductions, encouraging others to donate, personal benefit, or greater status and recognition in the community. This Dvar Torah is about the “other reasons”.

(Gimel) The text (*Pesachim 8a-b, Rosh HaShanah 4a, Bava Batra 10b*):

הָאוֹמֵר “סָלַע זֶה לְצִדְקָה בְּשִׁבִיל שְׂיַחֲיָה בְּנִי”
אוּ “שְׂאֵהֶיָה בְּן הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא”
הָרִי זֶה
צְדִיק גָּמוֹר

If a person says,

“I am giving this *sela*-coin to Tzedakah
so that my child **שיחיה**/should live/be well/recover,
or that I should be allowed into the Next World –
that person is **a complete Tzaddik**.”

This statement leaves many people with a sense that the desire for personal benefit spoils and even negates the value of the very act of Tzedakah.

(Dalet) Four interpretations from three traditional Jewish commentators: **רש"י** (*Rashi* (1040-1105), the **רשב"ם/Rashbam** (*Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Shmuel Ben Meir, 1083-1174*), and **תוספות/Tosafot** (*mainly 13th-15th Centuries French and Spanish commentators*) understandably had difficulty with this text. Here are their comments:

(1) (רש"י/Rashi #1, Pesachim 8b) – A complete Tzaddik זה בדבר זה/by this specific act of Tzedakah because the person did, in fact, perform the Creator's Mitzvah, even though the person included his or her own benefit. Similarly, my good friend and teacher Rabbi Dan Moskovitz states the same idea, “*It's a Mitzvah to do a Mitzvah*”, which, by definition, the person has done.

(2) (רש"י/Rashi #2, Rosh HaShanah 4a) – A complete Tzaddik אם רגיל בכך/if the person gives Tzedakah regularly.

(3) (רשב"ם/Rashbam, Bava Batra 10b) – A complete Tzaddik על דבר זה/ומחשבה זו/For this specific act and for? (despite?) the person's motivation, Or, possibly: Because the person also had the thought to give Tzedakah.

(4) (תוספות/Tosafot, Pesachim 8b) –

שאם לא תבוא לו אותה הטובה
שהוא מצפה
תוהא ומתחרט
על הצדקה שעשה
אבל מי שאינו תוהא ומתחרט
ה"ז צדיק גמור

If whatever the individual personally asked for did not happen as a result of the contribution, that person regrets (giving the Tzedakah) However, if the individual does not regret having donated the Tzedakah money — this is a complete Tzaddik.

(5) (A recent interpretation) — My friend and **מורתי/Morati-Torah-teacher**, Anne Andrew explains: When the person giving Tzedakah sees the other person as herself/himself (with no overtones of “There, but for The Grace of God, go I”), *then* the adjective **גמור/gamur-complete** applies. Recognizing the human commonality of both the giver and the recipient is the source of “completeness”.

(Hay) *What to conclude:* It is obvious that the classical commentators struggled to grasp the meaning of these words. For many people their solutions are still unsatisfactory and somewhat remote from the original intent of the text. *But*, since our tradition considered this Talmudic text important enough to be preserved and transmitted to us many centuries later, as students of Torah we are obliged to continue to work with these words (as Anne Andrew did). We are asked to turn them over and over again in our minds, and perhaps to discover additional and quite possibly more satisfactory interpretations.

*The “Six Questions” is examined extensively in Dvar Torah #18 in my separate anthology “Jewish VIP’s-Values, Ideals, and Pinciples”.

29. עבודה/Avodah

Pirkay Avot-פרקי אבות is certainly one of the more popular texts studied by adults, and by students as young as junior high school. A few reasons for its popularity are easy to ascertain:

(1) The material is aphoristic, and many phrases are easy to memorize.

(2) The Hebrew is mostly straightforward, elementary, and therefore accessible to students with a minimal background in Rabbinic Hebrew.

(3) Since it is a section of the earlier part of the Talmud, The **משנה/Mishnah**, the chapters have none of the complex discussions and argumentation that appears in the later **גמרא/gemara** part of the Talmud.

(4) The content of the material is mostly about ethical living.

(5) Most quotes invite discussion between the teacher and students, among the students, or opportunities for thought and contemplation for the student reading the text when he or she is alone.*

Very early on (chapter 1, the second Mishnah) is the following statement.

שְׁמַעוֹן הַצְּדִיק הָיָה מְשִׁירֵי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוֹלָה
הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר
עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד
עַל הַתּוֹרָה
וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה
וְעַל גְּמִילוּת הַסְּדִים

Shimon HaTzaddik was among the last of members of the כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוֹלָה/Knesset HaGedolah-The Great Assembly.

He used to say,

“The world stands on three things:

**The Torah, The Avodah,
and גְּמִילוּת חֶסְדִּים/Gemillut Chassadim-kind, caring acts
that benefit other people.**

(*Aleph*) Concerning the כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוֹלָה/Knesset HaGedolah-The Great Assembly, scholars, having little material to work with, fix the date only as “early”. This means sometime before the beginning of The Common Era, before the Mishna, and while the Second Temple still functioned. They cannot tell us much more than to surmise that this assembly had a kind of leadership and/or religious function.

(*Bet*) Since Shimon HaTzaddik uses the definite ה-“the” in הַעֲבוּדָה/haAvodah, he is referring to הַעֲבוּדָה/haAvodah (capital “A”) — *The Temple ritual*.

(*Gimel*) Over time, two things happened to the word עֲבוּדָה/avodah:

(A) Later, the sages changed the meaning to “prayer”, calling it עֲבוּדָה שְׁבֵלֵב/avodah shebaLev-service of the heart.

(B) The word also means “work, labor”, and came to describe the amazing physical labor of the חֲלוּצִים/chalutzim/Pioneers who reclaimed the land in the early Zionist years.

When teachers explain this text, they often stress (A) the all-important and bold historical transition from animal sacrifice and the other Temple rituals to prayer.

(*Dalet*) Following the Talmudic sages who intentionally re-defined עֲבוּדָה/avodah, I offer an additional non-literal possibility: Tying together all three of Shimon HaTzaddik’s examples, עֲבוּדָה/avodah means the service, the labor, the effort in performing Mitzvahs of גְּמִילוּת חֶסְדִּים/gemillut chassadim-caring, compassionate acts towards others. The first element — Torah — would be the values-basis for the way a Menschlich Jew, should live by doing גְּמִילוּת חֶסְדִּים/Gemillut Chassadim.

**For individuals who want to study the entire אבות פרקי/Pirkay Avot, be aware that there are a number of historical, contextual, grammatical, and syntactical difficulties. Some words are extremely difficult to translate. More problematic are several existential, theological, psychological, and sociological passages that are quite difficult for our modern Jewish sensibilities to accept. And because of its popularity, an extremely large number of manuscripts exist. It was copied and miscopied many times. This creates a problem for even the best scholars attempting to determine what the sages actually said. Nevertheless, none of this should not be an obstacle to continue to study אבות פרקי/Pirkay Avot. It is a true gem of our literature, replete with great wisdom and insight about living a Jewish life well.*

30. Bar/Bat Mitzvah Re-Visited: The Dictionary Scorecard

I have said many times that I am bothered by *some rabbis’, teachers’, or parents’* occasional translation of the term בַּר/Bar or בַּת/Bat Mitzvah as *son* or *daughter of a Mitzvah*. It sounds like bad English, bad Hebrew, and bad Aramaic to me. So I finally got down to doing some admittedly unsystematic research on בַּר/Bar and בַּת/Bat as an element in compound terms.

I am certain this was a result of my late older brother Stanley’s, ז״ל, influence. He had a PhD in physics, had been working with computers since the days of punch cards, and was the co-author in his 70’s of two books on cyber security. That’s how most people knew him.

But no less important to him personally, was the fact that for almost 30 years he also taught Torah between מִנְחָה/mincha and מַעֲרִיב/ma’ariv on a late Shabbat afternoon, usually on some Biblical text: the סִידוּר/siddur or מַחֲזוֹר/machzor, or some selection from

usually on some Biblical text, the **הלכה/Halachah**, or some selection from the **הלכה/Halachah**. He continued almost until the time he passed away on Sukkot, 2019. That's the key to knowing something about The Other Dr. Stan Siegel: He was a very serious student of texts and a superior Hebraist.* Two years of intensive study at Hebrew University gave him a solid foundation for Hebrew study which he pursued for the rest of his life.**

His influence on me explains why I think “son” or “daughter” of a *Mitzvah* grated on my ears.

First of all, **בר/bar** in Aramaic is the equivalent of **בן/ben** in Hebrew. Nowadays it is used almost as frequently in Hebrew as it was originally in Aramaic.

The range of meanings for **בר/bar** and **בן/ben** goes far beyond *son*, particularly when connected to another word. The same being true for the Aramaic feminine terms **בת/bat** and **ברת/barat**. These will be discussed below. But first I want to list the dictionary “scorecard” of how many entries for **בר/bar** or **בן/ben** compounds that they list. Obviously the same method could be used for the feminine **בת/bat** and **ברת/barat*****

א Brown Driver and Briggs Dictionary of the Bible (The “BDB”):

2 full double-columned pages.

ב Sokoloff’s Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic:

6 pages, 13 columns.

ג Ben Yehuda’s magnum opus Dictionary and Thesaurus of the Hebrew Language

2½ double-column pages: 5 columns.

ד Even Shoshan’s החדש המלון/HaMilon heChadash-The New Dictionary:

3 columns + 1 ½ more in the supplementary volume.***

ה Reuven Alcalay’s The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary:

3 1/3 columns.

From this crude mathematical scan of how many times and in how many ways it is used, we see that **בן/ben** or **בר/bar** alone can mean *son*, and compounded with another word means *a member of a class, a diminutive, an expert*, to list only a few. Barely scratching the surface of these lists, here are some examples of definitions of these compounds:

בן עשרים/ben esrim-20 years old, a 20-year-old person,

בן בליעל/ben beliya’al-a sleazeball, lowlife, nogoodnik,

בן ברית/ben berit-ally,

בן חורין/ben chorin-a free person,

בר אנש/bar inash-human being,

בני ימא/b’nai yama-dolphins, and

בני סיומא/benay siuma-the students that sit in the back row

In conclusion, it makes much more sense to accurately translate *Bar Mitzvah* as “Mitzvah Man” and *Bat Mitzvah* as “Mitzvah Woman”, which is *really* what the 12- or 13-year-olds become when they come of age as a Jew.

*Some family members used to joke that — had Stan advertised on the Web — he would have been the go-to person on all matters of Hebrew grammar in at least six counties in the Washington area all the way south to Richmond and an hour north to Baltimore.

To provide more context about my brother, Stan also owned at least four decades of the publications of **ללשון העברית/האקדמיה/haAkademia laLashon haIvrit-Israel’s Academy of the Hebrew Language. This marvelous institution conducts research into the history and meaning of Hebrew words, sets the proper rules for contemporary Hebrew grammar, and creates new words for this ancient/new language.

***Since the full official names of these volumes is often very long, I am paraphrasing.

My Shift Away From Using the Term “תקון עולם/Tikkun Olam”

Alef. The Problems:

The term **תקון עולם/Tikkun Olam**-repairing the world is an excellent and useful descriptive for Mitzvahs. In fact, the Hebrew root **תקן** is the same for fixing a broken toy or repairing a computer. However, I have recently understood that I have overstressed and overused in my writings and presentations. Some friends have pointed out a problematic issue in our contemporary society: The universalization and subsequent stress on **עולם/Olam**-repairing the *world* has led some Jews to neglect the needs of the Jewish People and Israel. Their oral and written rhetoric often reveal an obvious and toxic bias.

Once that issue was raised, I began thinking in general about the term: Focusing too much on the sheer enormity of *global* human and environmental needs, individuals giving **Tzedakah** and doing **Gemillut Chassadim** might become so overwhelmed and intimidated that they would refrain from playing the violin in a hospital or nursing home to make people happy. They might devalue their Mitzvah, thinking that *whatever Mitzvahs they are doing seems so incredibly insignificant, what's the sense?* For example — on occasion, I have explained to my audiences that I adopted a habit I had learned from someone else to buy one extra item every time I grocery shop to donate to a local food bank or soup kitchen. I have been doing it now for more than 40 years. So I ask, “How many cans of tuna, jars of peanut butter, and packages of pasta does that add up to?”

Furthermore, for parents, as a habit-forming education for children as they grow up, this is an excellent method to train them. At different ages, the child can choose which item to donate, or to partially or fully pay for the item.

One Midrash (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:21) relates that the sage Rabbi Tanchum had the same custom of buying extra when he shopped. However, a different version (Pesikta Rabbati 4:3) records that it was *his mother* who shopped for groceries that way. I have wondered if the sage's custom was a result of having gone with his mother from early childhood and realized how important it was to do “when he grew up”.

In my mind, though, there is no question that playing 25 minutes of Mozart in those settings is nothing short of *cosmic*.

So, instead, just for a short while now — without taking into consideration all the pain and suffering in the world — *I will just leave the Bat Mitzvah kid who donates her outgrown soccer equipment, or the young people who play poker* and mah jongg with residents of assisted living facilities and nursing homes to do their thing.* Unquestionably, it is enough that she does the Mitzvah that allows another child to have fun playing soccer, and some Elders will enjoy a couple of hours of pleasant friendship playing with the young person — ***this is no small thing.***

Bet. Maimonides

Conceptually, The Rambam has a different reading of the Hebrew. (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ahavah, the Order of the Prayers, Blessings for Rosh HaShana*) He spells **לתכן**** with a **כ** instead of a **ק**. And though in modern Hebrew **לתכן** and **לתקן** are pronounced the same, the root **תכן** carries the meaning “to arrange, put in order, adjust, measure, gauge, complete, examine”. I believe this closely reflects the opening passages of Genesis, the original story of making order out of chaos. So, too, the implications of Maimonides' spelling. Mitzvahs can bring some order and sense to vast disarray in the world around us.

Practically: Since both words sound the same, in my oral presentations, I still have to refrain from using the Tikkun Olam term, unless I give this lengthy explanation of the two spellings.

C. One final possibility

If you are one of those people who has no talent for, or interest in fixing things — it may be that one of the verbs above will provide you with the key for your *personal* efforts to connect Mitzvahs and the world.

**Once, when I was giving a talk to a group of middle-school students, a female student about age 11 or 12, told the group that she often plays poker with the residents of the nursing home. Later on, some of us joked that we hope it wouldn't lead her to a life of hard liquor, profane language, and running around with loose men.*

*** We know this is his authentic spelling and not a copyist's mistake because there exists an absolutely reliable autographed copy of his Mishneh Torah in his own handwriting.*

Mitzvah Heroes and “Regular” Heroes

Some Introductory Texts and Quotes

**A. Charismatic leaders make us think,
“Oh, if only I could do that, be like that.”
True leaders make us think,
“If they can do that, then...I can too.”**

(John Holt, Educator)

B. ...some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.

*William (זאב, וועלוועל) Shakespeare
Twelfth Night, Malvolio, Act II, Scene 5*

**C. Rabbi Elazar Says:
Tzaddikim/Good People say little and do much.**

אמר רבי אלעזר
שצדיקים אומרים מעט
ועושים הרבה
Bava Metzia 87a

**D. The path of Tzaddikim/Good People
is like radiant sunlight,
ever brightening until noon.**

וְאֶרְחַצְדִּיקִים
כְּאֹרֶן נֹגֵה
הַיּוֹלֵךְ וְאֹרֶן
עַד־נֶכּוֹן הַיּוֹם
(Proverbs 4:18)

**E. “A time to embrace” (Ecclesiastes 3:5):
If you see a group of Tzaddikim/Good People standing near you,
stand up
and hug them
and kiss them
and hug them again.**

עת לחבוק
אם ראית כת של צדיקים עומדים
עמוד
וחבק
ונשק
וגפפם
Ecclesiastes Rabba 3:5, 1

F. “And those who bring the people to do the right thing shall be as eternal as the stars.” (Daniel 12:3)....

**Just as one sees the light of the stars
from one end of the world to the other,
so, too, one sees the light of The Righteous
from one end of the world to the other.**

**Just as the stars are sometimes visible
and at other times hidden,
so, too, with The Righteous Ones.**

**And just as the clusters of stars are so numerous
they cannot be counted,
so, too, are the groups of Righteous Ones
innumerable.**

וּמִצְדִּיקֵי הָרַבִּים כְּכּוֹכְבֵּי לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד
וּמֵה כּוֹכְבֵּי רוֹאִים אֹרֶם
מִסּוּף הָעוֹלָם וְעַד סוּפוֹ
כִּי צְדִיקִים רוֹאִים אֹרֶם
מִסּוּף הָעוֹלָם וְעַד סוּפוֹ
מֵה כּוֹכְבֵּי פְעָמִים נִגְלִים
פְעָמִים נִכְסִים
וּמֵה כּוֹכְבֵּי כְתוּת כְתוּת
שֶׁאֵין לָהֶם מִנִּין
כִּי צְדִיקִים כְתוּת כְתוּת
שֶׁאֵין לָהֶם מִנִּין

(Sifre Devarim, Ekev 11, 47)

31. My Eema's Heroes (Written in the late 1980's)

In Memory of
Edythe Silberblatt Siegel
1914-1994
יהי זכרה ברוך

One of my prize possessions in a gift from my mother. Long ago, I asked her if she would give it to me.

It is a photograph taken in the mid-late 1930's of a group of women newspaper reporters standing with Eleanor Roosevelt outside some mansion in New Jersey. At that time, my mother was a reporter for the Asbury Park (NJ) Press. The reporters had just interviewed the First Lady, and then came out for a group picture. My mother is standing to Mrs. Roosevelt's immediate right.

It was a memorable day in my mother's life.

She admired Mrs. Roosevelt greatly, read her syndicated column, "My Day", regularly, and followed her humanitarian activities wherever they took her. I recall the pain in my mother's voice shortly after Mrs. Roosevelt died when she told me how much this great woman had suffered from her final bouts with disease. Once, she had seen Mrs. Roosevelt in her last years at a short distance at Washington National Airport. She described how she had personally witnessed the terrible physical toll her declining health had taken on her. I could hear the distress in my mother's voice as she told me — even years afterwards.

Inevitably when I ask my audiences about heroes, I say, "I am thinking of three women, two Jewish and one not Jewish, who were my mother's heroes. Who are they?" Most often, the answers are "Eleanor Roosevelt", "Henrietta Szold" (the founder of Hadassah), and "Golda Meir". Almost always those three.

As it happens, my mother also had the opportunity to meet Miss Szold, in Atlantic City, also in the late Thirties. It was the last Hadassah Convention that Henrietta Szold attended.

At another time, I called Mom, to ask if she had also met Golda Meir. Indeed she did, once in Jerusalem when Golda was Prime Minister, and one other time, in about 1947, at a Zionist gathering in Washington.

It was obvious that my mother wanted to be like these three people "when she grew up".

32. Eleanor Roosevelt

In 1939, Howard University in Washington, DC, invited the internationally-known contralto Marian Anderson to give a concert in her exquisitely rich voice. Anticipating a huge audience, the university officials attempted to reserve Constitution Hall as an appropriate venue — but they were turned down. Marian Anderson was a black woman, and Constitution Hall was owned by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). There was no room in their property for "her kind".

When Eleanor Roosevelt — the great **צדקה/Tzadeket-righteous woman** of the Twentieth Century — learned about the incident, she resigned her membership in the DAR.

Then she wrote about it in her widely-syndicated column *My Day*, whose regular faithful readers included millions of American women.* Ms. Anderson's reaction was that *The First Lady not only knew what was right; she also did what was right.*

**Later, some influential people in Washington arranged for Ms. Anderson to give a concert on the steps in front of the Lincoln Memorial. 75,000 people came to hear her. This is the same place where, 24 years later, Martin Luther King delivered his “I have a dream” speech.*

But the offensive deed had been done. The insult and damage had been not only to Marian Anderson but also to the American people.

33. Lis Hartel

1. Lis Hartel (born 1921), an accomplished horsewoman from Denmark, contracted polio when she in her twenties and pregnant. For two years she struggled with the pain from attempting to continue riding until she could mount a horse again. Despite the useless muscles in her legs (most striking visually in pictures of how thin they appear in her riding boots), she eventually regained her exceptional skill. At age 31, riding Jubilee, Lis Hartel went on to win the silver medal in dressage at the 1952 Olympics, repeating her accomplishment in 1956. When the reporters from around the world saw that she needed help mounting her horse and stepping up to the platform to receive her medal, they learned her inspiring story, wrote about it, and sent their dispatches to the far reaches of the globe.

*From the physical, psychological, and emotional benefits Ms. Hartel had experienced, and the insights about the unique benefits of the horse-and-rider relationship, she developed her method of teaching others. This is the historical origin of the world-renowned field of rehabilitation known as therapeutic horseback riding.**

*Sounds fairytale-ish? But from my visit with her in at her home at Stenklammergaard, Gronholtvej 86, 3480, Fredensborg, Denmark** in the 1980’s, I knew it was true: Both from our conversation and from the pile of newspapers *from everywhere* that I looked through. And, a few steps from her home, was a the stable of horses for lessons for those individuals who continued to come to her to have their lives transformed. She continued to teach and inspire well into old age.****

2. Franklin Roosevelt (born 1882) contracted polio in 1921 at age 39, the same year that Lis Hartel was born. In moments of leisurely musing, I thought: If Ms. Hartel had been born 30 years earlier, and the future President had heard about her pioneering breakthrough — I wondered how different the last 24 years of his life would have been. And how different America would have been when he was the President. And how different The United States and the world would be today.

But I leave that question to the theologians.

**Now called “equine-assisted therapy”.*

***Denmark was an unlikely destination for me. It just wasn’t high on my list of places to visit. But one summer, my Mitzvah hero Anita Shkedi, the founder of all therapeutic horseback riding in Israel, told me about one of her own Mitzvah heroes — Lis Hartel. I immediately knew I wanted to meet this woman.*

****When we left the house for dinner, Ms. Hartel walked down the few steps to the car with the assistance of a cane.*

I wrote a more complete account of Ms. Hartel’s life and influence in my book Heroes and Miracle Workers. The title should have been, Lis Hartel, The Grande Dame of Equine-Assisted Therapy.

34. My Kind of Ushpizin/אושפיזין
*Supplementing and updating the Jewish Mystics' practice
of inviting elevated souls into our Sukkah
by finding the Mitzvah heroes all around us
and having them as our guests*

According to the mystics, we should invite into our *sukkah* seven distinguished Biblical guests individually on different nights. They are called **אושפיזין/ushpizin**,* and various traditions have arisen over the centuries for welcoming these guests into our temporary homes.

I. Ushpizin – my problems with the traditional practice

A. The word:

(Aleph) The root of the Aramaic **אושפיזין** word means “**hospitality, a place to stay.**” As mentioned above, a few centuries ago, Jewish mystics introduced a custom to invite seven special Biblical guests into the *sukkah*.**

I think it is because the custom has so much potential meaning.

(Bet) I also think it is also because it is such a weird-sounding name. Certain words, names, and things stay with us for no logical reason, like Syngman Rhee, Bronco Nagurski, and Catfish Hunter, the Congo’s Moises Tshombe, infarct, sphygmomenometer, and the mountains Annapurna and Kilimanjaro. For me, the most memorable one is *oblate spheroid*, the true shape of the Earth, which was revealed to me as an undergraduate in Geography-Geology F1101x.

B. My problems: Did our mystics expect me to have Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David, sitting around the table in my Sukkah? There are several problems with this scene:

(1) The stress would drive my blood pressure through the branches of my *sukkah*’s roof.

(2) No matter what the custom of **אושפיזין/ushpizin** recommends, I’m not so sure Isaac wants to be seated next to his father.

(3) Being a feminist, I wonder why our historical women heroes were not invited, including:

(a) Miriam,

(b) Pharaoh’s daughter Bitiah;

(c) white-haired great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother **Serach bat Asher**, still in her full vigor and untouched by the least hint of impaired memory;

(d) Four-Star-General Devorah, all decked out in her exquisitely burnished *Yom Tov* sword, and her boots, helmet, and shield;

(e) the Talmudic Rachel - not because she was Rabbi Akiva’s wife, but because of the insightful and brilliant woman that she herself was***

(f) the Talmudic Bruria, not because she was Rabbi Meir’s wife, but because of the brilliant and compassionate woman that she herself was***

(g) the scholarly *and* Halachically-outspoken **Reina Batya**, not because she was the wife of Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, the *Rosh Yeshiva* of Volozhin; but because of who she herself was

(h) Golda Meir looking like a nondescript schoolteacher;

(i) Henrietta Szold;

- (j) **Nechama Leibowitz**, who single-handedly rescued profound Bible study for scholars and “regular” students alike, still the dazzling teacher into her 9th decade.
- (4) The flow of conversation.
For a moment just consider Moses:
- (α) What if he stuttered, stammered, or mumbled so badly that I wouldn’t understand what he was saying?
Would it be proper for me, little Danny Siegel from Arlington, Virginia, to say to *The משה רבינו/Moshe Rabbeynu* as politely as possible, “If you would, could you please repeat that?”
- (β) Or Jacob:
Would I, son of an osteopathic physician, blurt out, “How’s your hip doing?”
- (γ) or Joseph:
Just exactly what would I say as an opening line to His Majesty the Jewish viceroy of Egypt?
Would my attempt at elevated, diplomatic Hebrew sound phony?

(5) Ritual logistics — Would I ask King David to lead *Birkat Hamazon* after dinner because he has such a sweet voice, or am I supposed to apologize to him, despite his royalty and relationship to the Mashiah, and ask him to defer and give the honor to a “commoner” who personified *Menschlichkeit*?

I certainly don’t know how Kabbalists visualize things, but by my way of picturing the scene, I can only say, “*Gevalt!*”

II. My vision of Ushpizin — I want to make it clear that I am not uninviting the Magnificent Seven. It’s just that they’d have to come *sans* priestly or royal vestments: Aaron’s **אורים/Uriim** and **תומים/Tumim**, **חושן/Choshen**, and **מצנפת/mitznetefet-miter**, Joseph’s gold neck chain and scepter of Egyptian authority, or King David’s wearing a bejeweled, dazzling crown and magnificent ermine robes.

Rather, they would have to sit unobtrusively at the end of the table and smile, and perhaps rise and hug *my אושפיזין/Ushpizin* guests.

Since my personal guest list is very long, I would only have room one or two each night.

On any given night, my **אושפיזין/Ushpizin** – whom I call Mitzvah heroes – would include:

(A) **Myriam Mendilow**, founder of Jerusalem’s, **יד לקשיש-Yad Lakashish-Life Line for the Old**, taking old beggars off the street and filling their lives beautifully and meaningfully by employing them in several creative workshops — not jingling coins in their palms to get attention, nor giving them mere busy work that would belittle their dignity.

(B) **Hadassah Levi**, who gathered more than 40 infants with Down syndrome from hospitals where they had been left behind by their parents, raised them, and now in their 30’s assured them a good life and opportunities to be Israeli adults as part of society’s regular work force.

(C) **Anita Shkedi**, founder of all therapeutic horseback riding in the Holy Land, providing relief, cure, promise, and hope for thousands of adults and children with an enormous range of physical, mental, emotional, and psychological limitations and

challenges.

(D) Avshalom Beni, Israel's pioneer in animal-assisted therapy. He considers his variety of cats, dogs, birds, and other animals his "co-therapists". The results of his sessions working with families and children in crisis are truly astonishing.

(E) Kalman and Malki Samuels, founders of Shalva, the Israel Association for the Care and Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, essentially children who are intellectually challenged and their families.

(F) Shmuel Munk, co-founder with Yoram Mordechai, of Bayit Cham. Bayit Cham's work is with one of the most difficult segments of Israeli society — people who live lives with mental illness. To say that Shmuel and his people are "rehabilitating" them, is a great understatement. Bayit Cham's goal is to integrate them into the Israeli work force and back into general society.

(G) Noach Braun, founder of the Israel Guide Dog Center for the Blind (IGDCB). Since he founded that program, IGDCB has successfully matched 764 dogs with blind individuals whose lives were fundamentally changed as a result.

(H) Ya'akov Maimon, recorder for the Israeli government, inventor of Hebrew shorthand, matching thousands of volunteers — some literally grabbed off the street to "be volunteered" — with the new immigrants from Arab countries who were flooding into the country by the tens of thousands in the early years of the State, teaching them Hebrew, tutoring the children in any subjects they needed, and welcoming the families to their new home. *And*

(I) When Maimon died in 1977, in 1977, **Joel** (pronounced "Yo-el") **Dorkam**, continued his work for more than 25 years.

(J) Clara Hammer, "The Chicken Lady of Jerusalem," continuing well into her 90's, anonymously paying for the Shabbat and holiday food for a couple of hundred families. They could come to her butcher, Mr. Hacker, get their Shabbat and *Yom Tov* food without having to pay. Or if they did not live nearby, they could go to their own butcher and pay from money The Chicken Lady had sent — money she collected from donations everywhere.

III. An extra-special guest among special guests — I began my search for Mitzvah heroes in 1975, though I was unaware back then that this was what I would do for the next four-and-a-half decades. I *do* remember that I met **The Rabbanit Bracha Kapach** on my very first Mitzvah-trip.

It did not take long to realize that **הרבנית/The Rabbanit** was a "classic" **צדקת/Tzadeket-righteous woman**, devoting her time, energy and Mitzvah-creativity for the benefit of others. I have always been uncomfortable when the introduction to a speaker states, "This person has devoted his/her life to..." However, as best as I can describe her life, this was true of nearly all the hours, days, weeks, months and years of The Rabbanit's life. Of course, she made abundant time for her relationship with her husband, children, and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

The following partial list alone of her well-known projects is enough to qualify her for the title "**צדקת/Tzadeket**":

- (א)** providing Passover food packages for hundreds of individuals and families;
- (ב)** lending wedding dresses to brides who could not afford to buy or rent one (and sheets, towels, and other household goods for the new home);
- (ג)** distributing food from the supply she kept on her apartment's balcony for the many regulars (and occasional strangers) who knocked on the door;
- (ד)** creating a summer camp for the neighborhood kids and school supplies when they returned to class in the fall,
- (ה)** organizing and participating in exercise and swimming lessons for stressed-out women, mostly mothers and grandmothers.

(ו) She also taught Torah regularly Shabbat afternoon in a nearby synagogue, and gave a great number of talks in many schools and in adult venues.

(ז) This list, however, does not include the *many thousands* of personal crises she handled through direct, intimate conversations with those broken or breaking people who streamed to her door. Whenever I sat with **הרבנית/The Rabbanit** in her apartment, inevitably someone would knock, in need of food, or spiritual, emotional, or psychological guidance and support, all of which naturally was discussed out of earshot in whispers.

I am neither a mystic nor am I a believer in Chassidic stories about their rebbis having some direct line of communication to Heaven. Nevertheless, there is no doubt in my mind that the **הרבנית/Rabbanit** had such a connection. Every time she responded to my questions about how she would pay for **ג, ב, א**, she would answer, “**השם יעזור/HaShem ya’azor-God will help.**”

And more often than not, the Holy One came through for her.

Those who follow cop shows on TV are familiar with the refrain, “Just doing my job, Ma’am,” after they have solved even the most intricate or dangerous crime and brought more justice into the world. **להבדיל-lehavdil** (to note the distinction between very different elements), **הרבנית/The Rabbanit** would have put that expression by *Dragnet’s* Sergeant Joe Friday, in her own words and would have said something like (I am paraphrasing), “**החיים-מצוות-Life is mitzvahs**”.

For **הרבנית/The Rabbanit**, that was why God gave her the gift of Life.

IV. In sum #1 — There are many, many more Mitzvah heroes I could mention. But even if I divided them up among all the days of Sukkot there would be so many, it would necessitate extending my *sukkah* into my neighbor’s yard. I am not certain that that family would agree to it. Most likely the *sukkah* would actually stretch down the block, no doubt violating several of Rockville, Maryland’s, codes. Furthermore, the mystics’ seven would be so far away from the head of the table, I would be considered a terrible host by having to shout just to hold a conversation with King David or Father Abraham. Besides, shouting would hardly be in the spirit of the **שמחה/simcha**, the joy of the holiday.

That’s the thing about **שמחה/simcha**: **שמחה/simcha** is supposed to be about unrestrained good feelings and unadulterated joy, hope for humanity and the world. Just consider the non-*simcha* mood of:

- (אא) A conversation with PTSD-Isaac,
ever consciously aware of and confused by
his father’s silence on the three-day trek to Mount Moriah
and seeing the knife in his father’s hand.
These thoughts would inevitably be lurking behind
any words in our conversation;
- (בב) or being on edge that something would set off
an outburst of anger from Moses;
- (גג) or needing a psychiatrist’s advice
about how to speak to Aaron,
with the image of the Golden Calf
constantly flashing before his eyes;
- (דד) or worrying about David,
his memory burdened by **בתשבע/Batsheva’s** husband **אוריה/Uriah**,
dead in the most dangerous sector of the battle lines
where the king had sent him.

How do you have a casual *schmooze* with any of them and, in the spirit of Sukkot contemplating all humanity’s being at peace around the world?

And that’s the thing about *my* invited guests: There’s no stress when you are with

them. They are humble through and through, and there is no taint of ego in their Mitzvah-work. There is a straightforward innocence about them, and none of them has The Dark Side of deceptive personalities. Despite their awesome achievements in making peoples' lives better, they are eminently and disarmingly approachable. Meeting any one of them, a person is immediately set at ease. This is what I think we would all want for the atmosphere in our *sukkah*. This would hardly be the case with the Kabbalists' list of guests.

I would summarize it this way: For 44 years I took American and Canadian teenagers from the United Synagogue Youth Israel Pilgrimage to meet these awesome individuals. A couple of years ago one of these teenagers said it best when referring to **הרבנית/The Rabbanit**, he stated —

“She’s cool!”

He was right.

V. In sum #2 — We would do well to add to and update our own list of the Mitzvah heroes that we have discovered to be **אושפיזין/Ushpizin**, elevated souls in our *sukkah*.

VI. One last thing I need to clarify — Few people have had the opportunities I have had to travel so extensively and to discover and meet the Mitzvah heroes I write about. But the fact is, Mitzvah heroes (including children) are everywhere if we would only attune ourselves to looking for them and focusing on them when they are brought to our attention: They are in the media, in our synagogues, other communal places where people gather, among our family and friends, and strangers we happen to meet.

The ones you discover and work with do not have to be of the caliber of the ones I have listed. For “yours”, however grand their soul is, and however great their Mitzvah work is, is just fine.

We may have missed the Mitzvah aspect in others because we were paying too much attention to their “success” and “achievements,” such as advanced degrees in European history or Carnegie-Hall-level piano performances.**** Those historians or pianists may very well be the utterly kind, caring, and unassuming people we want to intimately associate with and learn from. But being a Mitzvah hero goes beyond status, titles, popularity, or degrees.

In my opinion, *they* are the ones we should invite into our *Sukkah*.

**As occasionally happens so much in the development of word-meanings, I find it strange that in Modern Hebrew, the root of אושפיזין/ushpizin — אשפז — means “to hospitalize”.*

***As with many formerly peripheral practices, such as the Seder TuBishvat, אושפיזין/ushpizin has become increasingly popular in recent times.*

****Both Rachel and Bruria helped save the Talmud from being exclusively male-dominated.*

*****My friends know that, when I ask them about their grown children, they tell me what Mitzvahs they are involved in.*

My student and friend, Ari Bar-oz, works for the Jerusalem Post, and, with thanks to him, this Dvar Torah was published in the 2020 Sukkot Supplement. Reprinted with the permission of The Jerusalem Post.

I am grateful to my friend Rabbi Jonathan Porath for suggesting this approach to Sukkot and Ushpizin.

35. The 39,000 Most Popular Songs in the World

Ooooooh, he is *very* tall. He says he is only 6'4", but I think he is a lot taller.

Whenever I see him and give him a hug it feels like he is at least 7'8".

And when you see the video of him dancing in a circle with a little girl whose hair is beginning to grow back, you can't help but think he really *is* some kind of giant, which he *really* is: a Mitzvah Giant, and a very gentle giant at that. More — he's what you would call in my grandmother Tzirel's Yiddish, **א זיסער ייד** *a zisser Yid*, a very sweet Jew.

That's my friend, John Beltzer, and I am so lucky and happy he is my friend. Thousands of others would say the same, because he makes them happy. He makes them happy with his songs.

This is what he does: He and many of his friends who compose, sing, play, and record music, create special songs for individual kids who have life-threatening diseases. Each song is for only that one child and the lyrics are all about that child. The child receives it in the mail or by personal delivery by the songwriter or singer and it's called "Mark's Song" or "Debbie's Song", and it's just for them.

It is difficult to imagine how lousy it must feel for a kid to be in and out of the doctor's office or hospital, and experiencing this or that treatment, and how boring it must sometimes be to sit in the waiting room or ER for hours, of the long hours alone in bed, beside the discomfort, pain, and the terrible uncertainty of the course of the disease. Hard, it must be very hard. But it isn't so bad or boring or hard any more, because they all have a song of their own which they can play whenever they want and however many times they want or need it — even 100 times.

I have heard many moving stories from John including contact from a young woman who needed to replace the tape of her song, because she had worn out the original from playing it so many times. Another time he said that a woman called to ask if he would write one for her mentally ill child. And there was a letter from the parents of a boy who had died. At the funeral, they played his song in place of a eulogy.

The most moving story is from this letter that John received:

Dear Mr. Beltzer,

On behalf of the staff and patients at...Children's Center for Cancer...I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to you and everyone at Songs of Love for creating a song for our patient Julie. If it had not been for your dedication, Julie would never have heard her inspirational song.

As you know, Julie and her family were able to hear her song together the day before she died. We are so appreciative that you were able to compose the song and hand deliver it to the hospital in less than 24 hours when you were informed of the urgency of the situation. Julie's song served as a therapeutic tool in her last day of life to help recapture who she was before her illness took over. It is very kind and considerate individuals such as yourself that help make the patients' treatments more endurable....

Gratefully yours,

Betsy Carlson, CCLS, Child Life Specialist

And John and his friends have written more than 39,000 of these songs, and they are writing more and more all the time — about 1,200 a month. And *they have never turned down a request for a song*. And that's why the Gentle Mitzvah Giant is dancing in the kitchen with the little girl. They are listening to her song and she is *very* happy.

And so is John, because he is using his talent and caring for this special Mitzvah to make kids happy.

You simply *must* look at John's website: **www.songsoflove.org**

36. The Angel Pilot

I. The Birds

וּאֶשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל־כַּנְפֵי נְשָׂרִים וְאָבֵא אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי
...how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me (*Exodus 19:4*)

הֲנֵה כְנֶשֶׁר יַעֲלֶה וַיִּדְאֶה וַיִּפְרֹשׂ כַּנְּפוֹ
...like an eagle he flies up, ... soars and spreads his wings (*Jeremiah 49:22*)

כְּאֶשֶׁר יִדְאֶה הַנְּשָׂר
...will swoop down like the eagle (*Deuteronomy 28:49*)

II. Mitzvah hero Sigrid Ueblacker and Her Birds

If you were to make a list of specific things in Life that you really love, you would likely place at the top yours parents, spouse or partner, children, grandchildren, other close relatives, and friends. On my own personal list, after these, and no lower than category #2 or #3, would be flowers and birds. For flowers, there were my mother's roses in the back yard, irises I have written about in my poems, Texas bluebonnets, blooming cacti in Arizona, and — 10 minutes in Hawaii — the only words that come to mind are “incredible” and “mind-boggling”.

In the speeding, rushing electro-chemical connections between synapses in my brain, thinking about birds compares to flooring a sports car zero to 60 in five seconds or the crack and charge of a lightning bolt. Growing up in Arlington, Virginia, the cardinals and bluejays framed by winter snow are unforgettable pictures in my mind. But even that image is not my greatest emotional surge; it's when they flap their wings, leave the ground, perch for two seconds on a high branch on the giant oak on our front lawn, and then — up, up, and away, they are out of sight.

III. When I met Sigrid Ueblacker about 20-25 years ago, my overpowering amazement at birds soared exponentially. Sigrid was the founder of the Birds of Prey Rehabilitation Foundation (*BPRF-now BPF, www.birds-of-prey.org*) near Denver. People from everywhere would bring injured hawks, kestrels, buzzards, owls, falcons, and eagles to her to be healed.

She keeps the ones who can't survive in the wild for teaching human beings about the lives of these wondrous creatures. The rehabilitated birds are released by Sigrid and her volunteers back into their natural habitats in the wilderness. Sometimes they have to transport them hundreds of miles before their sublime return to their rightful, liberated, exquisite life in the air. I can't come close to imagining how they — the birds *and* the people — must feel at the moment when the cages are opened.

I have been remembering two particular experiences from my visit:

(1) When Sigrid took me into an absolutely enormous cage and I could see perched at the other end 10 golden eagles — a regal ornithological **מִיָּנָן/minyan** — that were on the mend. Awesome! (*There were also many mice, completely unaware that they were on Death Row.*)

(2) In the ER, Sigrid placed some type of hawk no more than 8 inches tall on my outstretched arm. We were practically eyeball-to-eyeball. It was sublime!

And I still can't grasp how a 747 weighing more than 970,000 pounds can lift 10 feet off a runway, let alone cruise at 35,000 or 40,000 feet.

For me, there's just something magnificent, magical, and mystical about flight.

IV. An Angel Pilot and His Single-Engine Propeller Mitzvah-Plane

Thirteen years ago, I was invited to speak to a group of teenagers in New Jersey. The purpose of my evening was to give them ideas about how they might wisely give away a rather large sum of Tzedakah money — \$9,000 or \$10,000 — at the end of the year. A certain woman had donated the money because she believed that young people should have this kind of experience as an essential part of their early Jewish education and Jewish lives.

In general, I remember a very positive feeling about the talk, and that the teenagers were attentive, thoughtful, responsive, and insightful, and took their Mitzvah-task-at-hand very seriously.

Specifically, there was one experience that stands out not only on that evening, but also in all my more than 60 years as a Jewish educator: One of the teenagers raised her hand and simply said, “My dad’s an Angel Pilot.” She also said she had sometimes flown with her father on Angel missions. And I distinctly remember her saying that she, too, wanted to be an Angel Pilot some day. I could clearly hear the pride in her voice as she told me that her own father had committed himself to such an amazing Mitzvah.

Her words really moved me. I had previously read about Angel Pilots and was fascinated by this particular Mitzvah. Angel Pilots fly patients who need treatment for cancer, other serious diseases, as well as for burns and similar medical issues to a hospital. These patients often live far from the medical facilities *and/or* from large commercial airports. The Angel Pilots’ small planes (usually single engine props), can land at these smaller airports which are much closer to the patients’ homes and to the medical facilities.

And, as expected from Angels, everything is done at no cost to the passenger/patient. The Angel Pilot owns the plane, pays for the maintenance, insurance, landing rights, and fuel.

I asked her if she had an article about her father’s Mitzvah-adventures as an Angel Pilot, and, if she had one, would she send it to me.

She did, indeed, have one and sent it to me not long after I had left New Jersey.

V. My Follow-up Detective Work

How I tracked down this student, Stephanie Krivitzky, after 17 years — and her father — Jerry, the Angel Pilot — is not important. Once we were in touch, we exchanged e-mails, and Jerry included a deeply moving article about his first flight with an Angel Pilot. He was just along as a passenger, but that experience convinced him to become an Angel Pilot himself.

VI. A Reflection: On seeing into the future

There can be no doubt that in 1903 two bicycle shop owners from Ohio named Wilbur and Orville Wright could never have imagined a Concorde or double-decker A380 or, for that matter, that their invention would become a vehicle that would eventually lead to extraordinary life-saving and dignity-preserving Angel-Pilot-Mitzvahs.

For decades, many teachers of Mitzvahs have stressed that ***you just never know*** what might happen as a result of some good thing you did, or even said, like Stephanie’s five-word sentence that night in New Jersey 13 years ago.

VII. Stephanie in 2020

Among the things Stephanie wrote to me were “*I’ve traveled all over the world, built up an amazing career in advertising/marketing/branding which has since led me to run the creative department of an e-commerce start up, and lived in New York, San Francisco, Amsterdam and New York once again.*”

I don’t know if by now she is an Angel Pilot, or even if she has a pilot’s license, but her next sentence was most meaningful, “*Just a few weeks ago my brother and I launched a new website for Rabbi Soffin’s rather astonishing foundation.* So while life has taken me all over, I’m still very much connected to the roots of my youth.*”

VIII. Postscript to “You just never know”

(A) Mitzvah-living would always play a profound part of Stephanie’s life, no matter the details of her career, and (B) Thirteen years later, I would remember, write about it, and ***you just never know***, someone who might read this Dvar Torah may decide to feel what Sigrid’s golden eagles and hawks and Jerry Krivitzky on his Mitzvah-flights feel — that certain joy, the transcendence from somewhere Up High in life.

He or she might just become an Angel Pilot.

IX. The Poem

John Gillespie Magee, a young pilot in the Royal Canadian Air Force, expressed the wonders of flying in his poem “High Flight”:

[I] put out my hand and touched the face of God.

**Joel Soffin, was Stephanie’s rabbi at Temple Shalom in Succasunna, NJ, where she grew up. Rabbi Soffin is one of the greatest Mitzvah-oriented rabbis I know. As a congregational rabbi, the number, extent, and quality of his projects was unbelievable. Not surprisingly, when he retired, he founded a Tzedakah foundation Jewish Helping Hands, Jewishhelpinghands.org. Within this new framework, his vision, activities, and effect on the lives of others is no less amazing than when he was at Temple Shalom.*

37. Why Young Chileans Are 6 Inches Taller Than Their Parents and Grandparents Were in the 1950’s (from the Toronto Star, March 21, 1992)

Suppose you and a friend are traveling through Scandinavia. At some point, perhaps while savoring the herring or salmon in Reykjavik or Oslo, you might remark about how tall and well-built the Icelanders or Norwegians are. Finishing the meal with some unusually tasty flatbread smeared with exotic berry jam, you might add, “What marvelous genes these people have!”

Now, suppose you and a friend are on vacation, strolling around Santiago or Valparaiso or Antofagasta, Chile.

Today you wouldn’t think, “The children are much shorter here than in America” —

Because **Dr. Fernando Monckeberg** set up a system of infant nutrition and intensive treatment centers throughout Chile;

And — whereas in the 1950’s more than two-thirds of Chile’s children age 6 and younger were undernourished and mentally damaged, today, about 8% are undernourished, most of them to a mild degree.

And — in the 1950’s, the infant mortality rate in Chile was more than 130 deaths/1,000 live births. Today it is less than 16/1,000.

Let us, then, consider, all those Chileans in their early- and mid-childhood, their teens, 20’s, 30’s and 40’s who are bright, active, animated citizens, because of **The Good Dr. Monckeberg**.

Let us, then, consider all those Chileans in their early- and mid-childhood, teens, 20’s, 30’s, and 40’s who might not even be alive today were it not for **The Wise Dr. Monckeberg** who suspected all along it wasn’t in the genes at all.

And so, we might want to find in the story of the life of **Dr. Fernando Monckeberg** what and who we might want to be when we grow up .

38. The Long (Miraculous) Life Of Irving “Buzz” Burrows

(Aleph) The Text — מדרש תהלים/The Midrash on Psalms (118:19) draws an interesting analogy based on a verse (Psalm 118:21) [my paraphrase]:

אֲדַבֵּר כִּי עָנִיתָנִי * וְתַהֲיִלִּי לִישׁוּעָה

Although You dealt harshly with me, You have been my deliverance. To what can this be compared? To someone who, when he had already packed all the provisions for a caravan journey, stepped on a thorn, or was bitten by a scorpion, or suffered sunstroke. The caravan left without him. He complained to God, “What have I done wrong? What are my sins?” Shortly afterward, he received a report that the caravan had been destroyed. Then he began to give thanks and to praise God, saying, “Had I been with them, I would have been [killed] like all the others.”

(Bet) How I Met Mr. Burrows — I knew Buzz Burrows when he was in his 50’s. In the late 1960’s, I was living in Miami for several months, and the Burrows family lived a few blocks away. I was at their house 3, 4, 5 times a week because one of Buzz’s sons, Larry, was one of my favorite students. I can still picture middle-aged Buzz in his easy chair, clicker in hand, watching TV.

(Gimel) Buzz Burrows at War — A while ago, Larry sent me two photographs. One shows Buzz smiling, all decked out in a top hat and tails, arm-in-arm with his new bride Sheila. The other picture was taken a few years earlier, during World War II. Buzz is in his sailor’s uniform. A month after Pearl Harbor, with his father’s signature, he volunteered at age 17. Naval seaman Buzz Burrows would spend 4½ years in the Service.

After his father passed away, Larry went through his father’s possessions. He found medals, including two bronze stars for bravery and a purple heart. He also discovered documents that showed that his father had served both in Europe — even at Normandy as a gunner on a landing craft — and in the Pacific.

Buzz Burrows was a loyal, patriotic American sailor.

But he also had a temper. One night, he got into a fight with the son of an officer on board the ship, was arrested by the MP’s, and — because the ship did not have a brig — he was thrown in jail in town. While he was locked up, his ship sailed without him, was torpedoed, and sank. There were no survivors.

When he was released, Buzz continued his service in the war on other ships.

Having heard this story, I was left with a jumble of speculations and questions:

During the War, when he heard that his ship had sailed and was lost at sea, what went through his mind? Those shipmates had been his closest friends, buddies-in-combat, who had watched each other’s backs. How hard was it then for him to engage in future life-and-death battles without them by his side? Obviously, he would continue to fight America’s enemies; *that* was why he wore the uniform. Now, though, he was transferred to another ship with a different crew, strangers. Who would have his back?

After the war, how did Buzz manage living with survivor guilt? Did the image of the torpedoes, sinking ship, and drowning sailors come to him every day, unexpectedly, intentionally, of itself, only now and again, regularly, or occasionally at night in terrifying nightmares, shaking him awake sweating and screaming?

And, as a result of this terrible memory, did he decide to live his life every single day with the intense, inescapable awareness of being alive?

I don’t remember him being the synagogue-going religious type, so I wouldn’t know if he saw a Divine plan behind his having survived. Nor is it my place to speculate if he thanked God, like in the verse in the Psalm.

But Buzz had a sailboat. I knew he was at peace when he took it out to sea around

South Florida, to the Bahamas, wherever. It didn't matter.

I sensed that being on the water *his way*, he felt free, truly alive, and happy.

(Dalet) Why I Wrote This Dvar Torah About Buzz Burrows — This was not my naïve attempt to find some deep meaning in the survival of the caravan traveler or Seaman Buzz Burrows. I leave all those difficult theological musings and speculations to others.

I just thought that it was fitting to add one more eulogy for this man — one of the millions of The Greatest Generation who bravely fought in World War II — because it was his duty and the right thing to do.

**I changed the first vowel and read the third word as עֲנִיתָנִי/anitani-“You treated me harshly” instead of אָנִיתָנִי/anitani-“You answered me”.*

Biblical Women Mitzvah Heroes

39. General דבורה/Devorah, שרה/Sarah, And Wonder Woman

(Aleph): *Intimate friends, partners, spouses, families:*

(1) *Our First Foremother Sarah:*

According to Biblical climatologists, it was a blazing hot summer day — a **חמסין/chamsin** — many centuries ago, when those three human-looking angels visited Avraham (Genesis Chapter 18). During that Divine-human encounter, they asked our first Forefather where **Sarah** was. He replied (*verse 9*),

הִנֵּה בְּאֹהֶל

hinay vaOhel-There in the tent

— as might be expected of women in the Bible. However, *the Midrash* portrays Sarah quite differently. *Beraysheet Rabbah 84:4* records:

א"ר חוניה

אברהם היה מגייר את האנשים
ושרה מגיירת את הנשים

Rabbi Chonia stated:

**While Avraham converted the men,
Sarah converted the women.**

Her devotion to revolutionary *Yiddishkeit*, and the vast numbers of potential new female Jews she brought under the wings of **השכינה/The Shechinah-God's Intimate Presence**, reveal an extreme activism, most certainly done outside of the the family tent's limiting confines.

(2) **דבורה/Devorah (שופטים/Shofetim-The Book of Judges, chapters four and five), four-star general, prophet, poet, judge*, בישראל/Aym BeYisrael-Mother in Israel (chapter 5, verse 7), and wife of Lapidot — The Ultimate Multitasker**

When Canaanite armies were imminently preparing to attack, she summoned three-star General **ברק/Barak**, ordered him to amass 10,000 troops, laid out the battle plan, and made it clear — like any contemporary Israeli army officer, **“אחריי/acharai-After me!”** — that she would personally lead the soldiers in her sector of the battlefield.

I see similarities to another historic military moment: Many centuries later, on June 5th, 1944, try to imagine another four-star** general Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), under whose command was the largest naval attack force to that point in history, thousands of warplanes, and 156,000 troops who were waiting to land on the beaches at Normandy. I picture him as he tensely read and listened to the uncertain weather reports. If the allies did not launch the D-Day attack on Europe on June 6th, there would be a long delay and a disastrously greater number of casualties. Though there are different recollections of his exact words, one version is that he finally said, “OK. We’ll go.”

While I could not find out whether General Eisenhower said this with an exclamation mark or a period. But it is clear from the Biblical text that when she gave Barak her orders, **דבורה/Devorah** was emphatic, demanding. I found her words very powerful (*Chapter 5, verse 12*):

[To herself:]

עוֹרֵי עוֹרֵי דְבוֹרָה

“Uri! Uri! Devorah!”-“Up! Up! Devorah!”

[To her Lieutenant General:]

...קום ברק

“Kum! Barak...!”-“Arise, Barak...!”

right before the battle began.

(Bet) Biblical models, contemporary life:

When **דבורה/Devorah** got home in the evening, I imagined her husband Lapidot asking, “Dear, how was your day

(a) composing poetry,

(b) judging whiny, angry, and volatile disputes between two people,

(c) receiving direct messages from God,

(d) defending our people and saving them from annihilation?”

Based on the various images of Devorah in The Book of Judges, I began to explore the subject of “Sharing Life with female or male heroes and Great Ones”. They might be:

heroes,

Mitzvah heroes,

inventors of a pill with a camera or a faster computer chip,

an author struggling to find the perfect plot twist

in her Great American Novel,

poets searching for exactly the right word,

universally-admired star athletes,

CEO's of a start-up that grew beyond the wildest imagination and

changed the very nature of society,

NASA employees playing their part in helping an astronaut

walk on the moon's surface,

police department forensic coroners

helping the police solve a horrific murder,

an emergency room nurse on call one night on, one night off, or

driven by — brain chemistry, electrical charges, and synapses pushed to the limit — what ultimately engages them in their lives.

Because of the often-all-encompassing commitment and high-powered personalities, there are many potential dangers to the spouse or partner in these types of intimate relationships. They might include constant struggle, protracted emotional strain, financial hardship — to the point of possible extreme poverty — embarrassment, loneliness, isolation, and even ostracism from friends.

The reality is that the full spectrum of relations exists among couples in The Big World Out There, and it is obvious that success depends on the personal make-up, stamina, emotional resilience, capacity to empathize, and the extent and depth of mutual love the partners have for each other:

(I) Some succeed in making it work — like Avraham and Sarah.***

(II) Since there is no Biblical record how Devorah and Lapidot got along in their daily lives, we have to fill in the details:

Did they communicate by long, unnerving silences?

Were there light-hearted moments,

and did he lovingly banter and poke innocent fun at her greatness?

Or did they sulk through their lives together?

We just don't know if he made dinner for her,

and whether or not she liked his cooking****,

remembered not only her birthday and their anniversary

but also commemorated annually her victories?

What did they do for a break?

Did they travel to some getaway at **צפפורי/Tzippori**
or to some remote air B&B for some slow-paced R&R?

Did they thrive and draw strength and wisdom from each other?

(III) We *do* know that in real life Gal Gadot (Varsano), Wonder Woman in the movies, has been happily married for several years to Yaron Varsano.

(IV) While thinking about Wonder Woman, I let my comic-book imagination roam freely. I began to wonder about Supergirl. When she was about to marry, could her fiancé possibly conceive of his future life with his beloved?

In fact, in his commentary to the Haggadah (*page 43*) the Torah-giant, Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein (1860-1941), similarly explained why Abraham's servant **אליעזר-Eliezer**, on his mission to find a wife for **יצחק/Isaac**, intentionally omitted certain details about Rebecca's potential husband. He was afraid that her father **בתואל-Betu'el** would not want to give her to the son of the religious revolutionaries Abraham and Sarah, and who undoubtedly would have to live a life as intense and complex as I described above.

(Gimel) A story

This is how things *can* work out: Avshalom Beni, a close friend of mine is one of my most distinguished Mitzvah heroes. Like most of them, he lives a life constantly encountering intensely-charged experiences working with children and families whose lives are painful and broken, often to terrifying degrees. He once told me that, when his son and daughter were grown, he invited them separately to have a private conversation. He asked his son, "Look, all parents screw up. Tell me what your mother and I did that *really* messed you up." The son's answer, "No, **אבא/Abba**, everything was OK." Then he asked his daughter the same question. She answered, "No, **אבא/Abba**. It was just fine".

(Dalet): Studying extraordinarily supercharged relationships

This topic is by no means my area of expertise. The tools of modern psychology and counseling have certainly conducted a great deal of research exploring many aspects of this complex issue. Still, in my opinion, a study of some of our Jewish texts for possible insights may be worthwhile. I believe that in tandem with their studies a much more extensive examination of Biblical, Talmudic, and Midrashic texts might prove beneficial and yield significant new results. From the moment I began exploring this topic, I sensed that examining the lives of some of our exceptional ancestors and their interactions with their Life's partners and friends would shed some light on how contemporary couples might successfully interact.

Consider this Dvar Torah as only an introduction to a continued examination of, and deeper thinking about, Devorah the prophet, face radiant from her intimate connection with God, poet in her creative moments, judge in her judicial robes, and general, armor, helmet, shield, and sword cleaned and gleaming — more than two millennia ago, the savior of the people

and all of us .

Not least of all, does she not — as **אם בישראל/Aym BeYisrael-Mother in Israel** — deserve to be ranked in our Jewish consciousness alongside Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah as one of our Foremothers?

*"**שופט/shofet**" in the **Book of שופטים/Shofetim** literally means "**chief**", "**charismatic leader**" rather than "judge". However, Devorah was literally a judge, as recorded in chapter four, verse five. There it describes how the people would come to Devorah, who sat under **תמר דבורה/Tamar Devorah-Devorah's Palmtree, למשפט/lamishpat-to render legal decisions.**

**He would not receive his fifth star until six months later.

***But there's no guarantee what this kind of **שידוך/shidduch** would do to the children.

****I also wonder about the details of dinner after a hard day on the battlefield. Did she like his homemade **חמום/chummus** and **חריר/charif**, was the vinaigrette dressing on the chopped tomato and cucumber salad a bit too sharp for her taste, and did he tone down the fiery sauce on the pasta *arribiata*? And did she tell a white lie for the sake of **בית שלום/Shelom Bayit-domestic peace**, saying it was **עֵדֵן גַּן עֵדֵן/ta'am Gan Eden-A taste of Paradise**.

A separate Dvar Torah in the future will discuss the life of **יעל/Yael**, by no means an insignificant hero during Devorah's warrior days. In the Book **שופטים/Judges, 4:17-21**, there is a gory description of how she killed **סיסרא/Sisera**, the enemy general.

40. Princess Ruth

I. Ruth in מגילת רות/The Book Of Ruth: I don't think I know anyone who doesn't like the story of Ruth. The Book of Ruth is only four chapters long, and while the text is not without some difficulties, the Biblical Hebrew flows smoothly and is easy to follow. The plot has only two problematic Halachic issues, both of which have been reasonably solved by various scholars, and, other than two or three words, the Hebrew is fairly straightforward.

Some of the reasons so many people love the Book of Ruth are:

(#1) Most beloved (and memorized) is, of course, Ruth's reply to Naomi (1:16-17),
**כִּי אֶל-אֲשֶׁר תֵּלְכִי אֵלָּךְ,
עִמָּךְ עַמִּי**

**“Wherever you will go, I will go,...
your people will be my people...”**

(#2) In 3:11 Ruth is called an **אשת חיל-eshet chayil**.* Jews know the term because many recite it to their partners before Shabbat dinner. In the context of the Book of Ruth, I think that the best translation of **אשת חיל** in this verse is **“an exceptional woman”**.

(#3) Moreover, people like the story because it is told in a pastoral setting, is a love story, and ends with Ruth becoming the great-grandmother of King David.

(#4) When compared to two of the other of the five **מגילות/Megillot** – the heavy Books of Lamentations and Ecclesiastes – the Book of Ruth is a great relief and a pleasure to read on one's own or to listen to in the synagogue on **שבועות/Shavuot**. To some people, the experience of reading the Book of Ruth feels somewhat similar to a child reading and re-reading (no matter how many times) *Alice in Wonderland* or Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Chozzerflaysh*.

II. The Midrash Re-Writes Ruth's Biography:

Everything about Ruth changed when my friend and **מורי/Mori-My Torah-teacher** Rabbi David Shneyer told me that Ruth was a princess. A Midrash (*Ruth Rabbah 2:9*) states that Ruth's father was none other than **עגלון/Eglon**, King of Moab, enemy of our people.**

Once I learned about *Princess Ruth* I felt that I couldn't just leave that “revelation” hanging. I began thinking “princess” and “father Eglon” and launched into a wide range of thoughts:

First, I needed to calculate how many years Ruth knew her father, and how old she was when he died. So I did a comparison to American presidents, two whose fathers and one whose grandfather were also presidents:

A. John Adams, died in 1826; his son John Quincy Adams, was born in 1767. So the sixth President was 59 when the second President died. What stories the son must have heard! — His father's personal time with George Washington, his work (along with Ben

Franklin) helping Jefferson edit the draft of the Declaration of Independence, and his term as President in the very earliest years of the United States of America.

B. William Henry Harrison died in 1841. His grandson, Benjamin, was born in 1833, so he only knew his grandfather when he was a young child. And his grandfather died after only one month in office, so there was virtually nothing to learn about his grandfather as President

C. George H.W. Bush died in 2018; his son George Bush was born in 1946. So, President George H.W. Bush died when President George Bush was 72 years old.

Comparisons to Ruth's life will be discussed further down.

For now, according to the Midrash (*Ruth Rabbah* 4:4), Ruth was 40 years old when she married Boaz. According to another Midrash (*Ruth Rabbah* 6:2) Boaz, having done what was necessary for the future of the Jewish people, was 80.***

Since Ruth is 40 in that Midrash, it is not difficult to imagine that she knew her father personally for several, or quite possibly, many years in her own lifetime before he was assassinated.

When I began to write this Dvar Torah, I naturally had thought to focus on other exceptionally courageous Biblical women. For example:

(a) **אסתר/Esther**, *savior of the Jews of Persia and Medea*, barging in on Achashverosh, not knowing whether or not the king would hold out his royal scepter and spare her life;

(b) **דבורה/Dvorah**, *savior of us*, leading the Israelite army into battle against the Canaanite enemies that wanted to annihilate us;

(c) **יעל/Yael**, *our savior*, all alone in her tent with the enemy army's General Sisera, dispatching him in a grisly manner worthy of any Twenty-First Century page-turner detective novel;

(d) **שפרה/Shifrah** and **פועה/Pu'ah**, *saviors of all of us*, the midwives in Egypt who defied Pharaoh's decree, risking their lives by refusing to murder the male Hebrew children that they had delivered, and, of course,

(e) **Pharaoh's daughter, Princess בתיה/Bitiah**, *savior of Moses, savior of all of us*.

It was the story of **Princess Bitiah** that got me thinking to look deeper into the life of **Princess Ruth**. Similar to **Princess Bitiah's** upbringing in the Egyptian palace, I wondered what it must have been like for **Princess Ruth** to grow up in Moabite King Eglon's royal household. Her father had fought, defeated, and ruled the Israelites for years. That is, until the Israelite chieftain **אהוד/Ehud** assassinated him in *New York Times* best-seller bloody fashion, resulting in 80 years of peace for the tribes of Israel. How old was **Princess Ruth** when this happened? What effect did it have on her mind, her developing personality, and her future direction in life?

And as if that family trauma weren't enough — our Sages' rather unconventional Midrashic imagination (*Midrash Ruth* 2:15) adds to Moabite Ruth's childhood ordeal, informing us that Eglon's father — *her own grandfather* — was none other than that Moabite **ממזר/mamzer**, King **בלק/Balak**. Did King Eglon tell **Princess Ruth** of her grandfather's attempt to destroy the Israelites by hiring the prophet **בלעם/Balaam** to put a curse on the Israelites before his army went into battle with them? Even though Grandpa Balak's evil plan did not eventuate, still, her *Zeyde/Sabba/Opa/Abuelo/Grandpa*, King Balak, was a significant part of her personal history. Did King Eglon recite that part of her family background as a bedtime story before he smoothed her long black hair on the pillow, gave her a warm fatherly hug, tucked his beloved daughter in, and kissed her good night?

On the one hand, I believe that the Midrash's admittedly fantastic re-shaping of Ruth's life spoils our image of **Ruth The Innocent and Pure**. But on the other hand, the Rabbis' wild imagination provides us with a Ruth who is an inspirational role model for future generations. With everything genealogically and psychologically conceivable

working against her, ultimately, as an adult, without hesitation, she says to her Jewish mother-in-law,

כִּי אֶל־אֲשֶׁר תֵּלְכִי אֵלַי
עִמָּךְ עַמִּי

*“Wherever you will go, I will go,...
your people will be my people...”*

III. A message for us: Scholarly articles, studies, statistics, and multi-colored charts about psychologically damaged foster children raised erratically in many homes, and children of alcoholics, drug addicts, abusive parents, and hardcore felons are much too numerous to count. Studies of what the odds are that these children would be condemned environmentally, genetically or, most likely, a combination of both to repeat their parents’ behavior, would fill many university professors’ and therapists’ filing cabinets.

Princess Ruth, as with our earlier hero **Princess Bitiah**, is the proof that — **whatever the projected scenario might be — that statistically possible pessimistic future is not absolute.**

For that message alone, I believe it is worthwhile to study the Book of Ruth on both the literal *and* the Midrashic levels.

When *we ourselves* sometimes feel overwhelmed and discouraged by the battering, mind-numbing flood of terrible news reports that assault us daily in the media, *we* would do well to remember — and deeply internalize — the Midrash’s biography of **Princess Ruth** the Moabite, daughter of **עגלון/Eglon**, King of Moab, granddaughter of **בלק/Balak**, King of Moab, and the message of her life’s story: There are many — though certainly not all — things in life which appear insurmountable that *can* actually be overcome.

IV. And I would add, of all the children’s books about princesses, someone should write one about *our Princess Ruth*.

V. AND — there is always that comforting thought that King Eglon and King Balak — father and grandfather of our Jewish hero **Princess Ruth** — great-grandmother of King David — are turning over eternally in their graves.

**The origin of those words is Proverbs 31:10. Etymologically, the two-word phrase has many possible meanings depending on the translation of the word חיל, including “strong” and “well-to-do”.*

*** Rabbi Shneyer was surprised I hadn’t heard this. He thought that it was a well-known Midrash that most religious school students had learned.*

****A late Midrash (Midrash Ruth Zuta 4:12) adds one more “fact” — Boaz died that very night. I leave it to others to explain exactly why whoever created that nasty, cacophonous detail wanted to spoil a perfectly good “...and they lived happy ever after” story.*

41. שפֵּרָה/Shifrah and פּוּעָה/Pu’ah

(Aleph) The ever-so-brief story

We know their names.

I think that is pretty amazing.

Pharaoh (which Pharaoh? what is his name?), the king of Egypt, was obsessed with the thought that there were far too many Israelites in his realm. They were a threat; they might overthrow him. So he issued a royal decree to the midwives, **שפֵּרָה/Shifrah** and **פּוּעָה/Pu’ah** by name, with the ghastly instructions:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְמִילְדוֹת הָעִבְרִית
אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאֶחָת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פּוּעָה:
וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיַלְדְּכֶן אֶת־הָעִבְרִיּוֹת
וְרֵאִיתֶן עַל־הָאֲבָנִים
אִם־בֶּן הוּא וְהַמְתָּן אֹתוֹ
וְאִם־בַּת הוּא וְחָיָה:

**“The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives,
one of whom was Shifrah and the other Pu’ah,
saying,
‘When you deliver the Hebrew women,
examine the birthstool:
If it is a boy, kill him;
if it is a girl, let her live.’” (Exodus 1:15-16)**
In the very next verse we read,

וַתִּירָאן הַמִּילְדוֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים
וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֵיהֶן מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם
וַתַּחֲיֶינן אֶת־הַיְלָדִים

**“But the midwives, fearing God,
did not do as the king of Egypt told them;
they let the boys live.”**

I would have liked to have met שפּרה/Shifrah and פּועה/Pu’ah, and in awe and speechless, would have stood up respectfully in their presence, kissed them on both cheeks, and given them a BIG hug. Risking their lives, they defied Pharaoh’s decree.* Had שפּרה/Shifrah and פּועה/Pu’ah obeyed, the Bible would have ended with Exodus 1:16.

No more Children of Israel,
no more Exodus, no Revelation at Sinai,
no Jewish history, *no more us*,
and a radically different history of the world .
(Bet) Scholarly debates

We know their names: שפּרה/Shifrah and פּועה/Pu’ah. Scholars debate back and forth in their articles and journals, focusing on two issues: (1) Just exactly who were these two women? (2) Because of the grammatical ambiguity of the phrase לְמִילְדוֹת הָעִבְרִית / *laMeyaldot halvriot*, were they Hebrew midwives or Egyptian midwives delivering babies of Hebrew women?

In no way do I want to minimize the importance of those debates, but my interest in these verses is otherwise: *The two midwives’ names are right there in the text!* Pharaoh is anonymously called “מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם/Melech Mitzrayim-King of Egypt”. Not Raamses not Seti not Thutmose not Amenhotep. Biblical scholars search (futilely) and compare and decipher and publish and argue until they reconstruct ancient history to *try to* determine that particular Pharaoh’s name.

But they have never succeeded. Nor will they succeed, no matter how hard they try.
(Gimel) The extremely great Torah-message

Why would the Torah tell us the names of the midwives — *two relative nobodies* — and not mention the name of this mighty ruler of all Egypt, one of the most powerful — if not *the* most powerful person in the world — and, who, in his own mind and in the minds of his people, was a god?

Isn’t the message that the movement of History, and Life itself, are not completely in the hands of the “official” leaders, the political powers — whether tyrannical or benevolent — of the day? Rather, history most definitely also flows, and Life is Life, because of the acts of Righteous People such as שפּרה/Shifrah and פּועה/Pu’ah.

(Dalet) From Proverbs 11:19

יְצַדִּיק יִסּוּד עוֹלָם:

The יְצַדִּיק/Good Person is the very foundation of the world.

*Quite naturally, many would think of the חסידים אומות העולם/chassiday ummot HaOlam-the Righteous Gentiles who saved Jews during the שואה-Shoah.

42. Pharaoh's Daughter בתיה/Bitiah The First Great First Responder

I. The Biblical Account

We all remember the basic story (*Exodus 2:5ff*): Pharaoh's daughter rescues Baby Moses. Were it not for that single fact, there would be no Moses, no Children of Israel liberated from slavery to freedom, and *there would be no us*.

II. With the Help of the Midrash

(A) According to the Midrash (*Leviticus Rabbah 1:3*, based on *I Chronicles 4:18*), Pharaoh's daughter's name was בתיה/Bityah, meaning "Belonging to God".

(B) One day, Bityah went to bathe in the Nile, but not for personal cleanliness or princessy pampering. She was washing away the scum of her father's paganism (*Sotah 12b*). She risked her life (as many first responders do) if her having saved this Israelite baby were to become known. Tyrants throughout history did not hesitate to murder family members who were a threat to their power. But I think that what she was really doing was completely scrubbing off *any* relationship to her murderous father.

(C) As is written in the Book of Exodus, she sent one of her maidservants to bring her the baby in the basket as it was floating down the Nile. Sending someone else was natural enough for a princess; Royals always had servants at their beck and call to do their bidding. But the Midrash wants to stress that you shouldn't ask someone else to do a Mitzvah when you can do it yourself. So the Midrash teaches that בתיה/Bityah *did*, in fact, do it herself. A Midrashic text in the Talmud (*Sotah 12b*) changes one vowel in the phrase וַתִּשְׁלַח אֶת-אַמָּתָהּ/vatishlach et amata-she sent her אַמָּה-"servant" to אַמָּה-"arm", i.e., "she stretched out her arm".

The text even goes so far as to state that בתיה/Bityah spotted the basket from a distance of 100 cubits (about 150 feet), and that – quite miraculously – her arm grew long enough to reach the basket, allowing her to *personally* rescue the baby.

From this fantastic Midrash, the Chassidic Rebbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787-1859) taught:

For people engaged in doing Mitzvahs for others — as with Bitiah — it is not unreasonable to think that miracles may happen.

You just never know.

(D) Princess בתיה/Bityah gives the infant the name משה/Moshe, from the Egyptian root meaning, "child, son". But somehow she must have secretly been in an אולפן/Ulpan, and what she really meant was the Hebrew root משה-to draw out. But her grammar was weak.* Grammatically his name should have been "משיתי-mashiti".**

(E) Not surprisingly, she joined the Children of Israel when they left Egypt.***

(F) By one of its fantastic leaps of imagination, the Midrash (*Leviticus Rabbah 1:3*) adds that she married none other than כלב בן יפונה/Kalev ben Yefuneh, The Other Good Spy (with Joshua) sent by Moses to scout out The Promised Land.

III. Nine Entered Paradise Alive

If your Hebrew school teacher or Bible professor at Cornell or Virginia Commonwealth University were to ask you to make a list of the

ט' נכנסו בחייהם בג"ע

nine people who entered Paradise alive (*Derech Eretz Zuta, 1*), meaning, without going through the common human experience of dying — you most likely would include **אליהו-Elijah** who went up to Heaven in a fiery chariot (*II Kings 2:12*), and **חֲנוֹךְ-Chanoch** (*English "Enoch"*) of whom it is written (*Genesis 5:24*),

וַיִּתְהַלֵּךְ חֲנוֹךְ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים
וְאֵינְנו
כִּי־לָקַח אֶת־אֱלֹהִים

**Enoch walked with God,
and then he was no more,
because God took him.**

(Both **אליהו-Elijah** and **חֲנוֹךְ-Chanoch** *did* make it in.)

Quite naturally, you might have also considered

Abraham,

but he isn't in that group.

Neither is Moses.

Nor King David.

But **Princess בתיה/Bityah**, daughter of the almighty evil Pharaoh of Egypt, *is* in that very select **חֲבֵרָה/chevra**, because, again, were it not for her,

there would be no Moses,

no liberated Children of Israel,

and **there would be no us**.

IV. In Commemoration

If Israel were ever to create a medallion celebrating and commemorating the work of first responders, the obvious design should be: On the obverse — Pharaoh's daughter **Princess בתיה/Bityah** in her royal attire, and on the reverse side, a compassionate young woman with royal bearing cradling Baby Moses in her arms, and softly singing a soothing Hebrew song to him****, so that he would no longer have any reason to cry.

**She must have still been in an Aleph-level class. When she declared, "For I drew him out of the water".*

***I suppose we should be grateful. "משה/Moshe" is less cumbersome to pronounce.*

****Even the movie says so.*

*****Which she no doubt had also learned in Ulpan.*

43. The Many Names of Moses

אבי ומורי/avi umori, my father, my teacher Julius Siegel, (מנוחתו עדן/menuchato Eden-May his soul eternally rest peacefully in the Garden of Eden), was a general practitioner doctor in northern Virginia for more than 50 years. Medical terms like "sphygmomanometer" (blood pressure machine) were a part of my childhood vocabulary.

Doctors' names were also a part of my growing up. Over the years, one name that my **אבא** mentioned kept popping up in my memory, "Charlie Hufnagel", a doctor in Washington. I loved the strange sound of his name — like Chesley Sullenberger, Ignaz Semelweis, and Niels Bohr. Later on, I discovered that Dr. Charles Hufnagel (1916-1989) was a famous surgeon, and was world-renowned for developing the Hufnagel heart valve. His invention was nothing short of an incredible breakthrough for generations of future

cardiac surgeons, and the salvation of countless patients suffering from life-threatening heart-damage.

Still later, I also began to wonder about Down syndrome (John L. H. Down, 1828-1896), Alzheimer's (Alois Alzheimer, 1864-1915), and, as everyone with diabetes knows, the islets of Langerhans (Paul Langerhans, 1839-1915).

Subsequently, I became curious about things or phenomena that became nicknames or attached to names in a person's lifetime or afterwards. The list expanded greatly. Just consider sports figures: Every Canadian knows The Great One (Wayne Gretzky), The Greatest (self-named by Muhammed Ali), Stan the Man (Musial), and The Iron Man (Lou Gehrig).

Consider how great a person **רבי יהודה הנשיא/Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi** must have been that throughout the Talmud, if the name "רבי/Rabbi" stands alone, everyone knew that it refers to only that one individual!

After that introduction, I want to turn to a Midrash from Exodus Rabbah (1:26):

ותקרא שמו משה
מכאן אתה למד שכרן של גומלי חסדים
אף על פי שהרבה שמות היו לו למשה
לא נקבע לו שם בכל התורה
אלא כמו שקראתו בתיה בת פרעה
ואף הקב"ה
לא קראהו
בשם אחר

She (בתיה/Bityah, Pharaoh's daughter) gave him the name "Moshe".

From this you learn the reward of people

who perform the Mitzvah of גמילות חסדים/Gemillut Chassidim —

who do good for others:

Even though Moshe had many names,

the only one he is known by in the entire Torah

is the name בתיה/Bityah the daughter of Pharaoh gave him.

Even The Holy One did not call him by any other name.

Indeed, her single act of גמילות חסדים/Gemillut Chassidim not only saved Moses, but changed all of Jewish history — even onto our own day.

I believe that the lesson is: For what do we want to be remembered by others? I do not mean "immortalized" for generations or centuries. My thought is: What will others associate with us when they think of us, now, today, tomorrow, 5-10 years from now, whenever? And my point is: It doesn't have to be anything earthshaking or revolutionary and not even necessarily big. We may have joined others at their Seder for many years, traveled hundreds of miles to be present at a bat or bar Mitzvah, wedding, funeral, or a *shiva*. Or that others might recall that we changed our overloaded schedule to drive them to the emergency room when they were in pain or to dialysis or chemotherapy, to take them grocery shopping, or to drive them to a class in conversational Hebrew at the synagogue.

We do not have to think in terms of being immortalized. I am certain Pharaoh's daughter thought she was only saving a baby and did not consider, or could not possibly know, the implications of her single act millennia into the future. So, too, ourselves, when we perform some act of צדקה/Tzedakah or גמילות חסדים/Gemillut Chassidim for its own sake. It is my sense that, *built into the very Mitzvah-act*, is that blessed possibility that we become a part of another person's life without knowing what that might mean for his or her future.

You just never know.

And for that, we ought to say, "דייננו/Dayyaynu-That is enough".

Perhaps it is even more than enough.

44. אלישבע-Elisheva

פיקוח נפש-Pikuach Nefesh– Saving Lives Big Time (As Told Humbly To Danny Siegel By The Hero Of Our Story)

Let me tell you about my family. There's my **אבא/Abba, עמינדב/Aminadav**, who must be somebody important because we keep getting invited to come over to Miriam's and Aaron's for Shabbat dinner. My **אמא/Eema** is **בלפורה/Balfora** a very gentle and kind woman, though most people don't know it because she does many Mitzvahs so quietly. And then there are the four kids: **נחשון/Nachshon**, who's six years older than I am, and in between, **ירמיהו/Yirmiyahu** ("Yirmi" for short), **בתשבע/Batsheva** ("Shevi"), and then me, **אלישבע/Elisheva** (usually just plain "אלי/Eli").

Since I am supposed to tell you The Story of Myself, you should know this is really about me *and* my big brother **נחשון/Nachshon**. Ever since I can remember he always watched out for me and took care of me. These were incredibly hard, terrible times in Egypt for us Hebrews, but even though things were so terribly tough, kids would still be kids, and sometimes some of them would make fun of me for no real reason that I can think of. I don't consider myself particularly cute – and certainly not adorable – but I'm not so funny-looking that other kids should be calling me names like "tubby", or "geek", or "doofus". Still, whenever they would taunt me, if Big Brother **נחשון/Nachshon** was around, he would always step in and get the others to back off, even if they were bigger, tougher, and scary.

And even though **אבא/Abba** or **אמא/Eema** were supposed to tell me stories or sing to me at night to help me go to sleep, as long as I can remember, **נחשון/Nachshon** took over and would tell me the most fantastic, wonderful tales, especially the ones about women heroes like **דבורה/Devorah**, **שרה בת אשר/Serach Bat Asher**, **אסתר המלכה/Esther haMalka-Queen Esther**, and **ברוריא/Beruria**. And sometimes he'd sing (even though his voice was a little raspy, and sometimes he was off-key) fun songs and funny songs and lullabies which helped me drop off into *very* sweet dreams, despite being the young child of slaves.*

He's 14 now, and I'm eight. For a year now, he has had to go out for long hours of backbreaking work just like all the adults because of Pharaoh's horrible laws. And still, even with all that, and coming home exhausted, he would still play with me for hours. Since he spent the day making bricks from clay and straw,** lately he made little ones for me so I could build anything I wanted. We would play as long as we wanted to, no matter how tired he was. Who could wish for a better big brother than **נחשון/Nachshon**?

Now, you should also know, that you wouldn't particularly pick **נחשון/Nachshon** out of a crowd. He's growing tall, and even though he has gorgeous blue eyes and thick dark black hair, he's really nothing special to look at. But he is *so* special to me. Even at 14, he's really a *Mensch*.

That's how I spent my early childhood, until things began to change quickly. All of a sudden, one day, Miriam's and Aaron's brother Moses showed up after running away for a few years, because he had a price on his head. Wanted posters with his picture were everywhere. The Egyptians were after him and wanted to throw him in prison or kill him because he had killed an Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Hebrew slave. But here he was now, out of the blue, telling Pharaoh that God wanted him to let us go and to free us from his slavery.

All kinds of strange things happened once he started to deliver God's message to Pharaoh: The Nile turned blood-red, frogs by the millions jumped around like crazy everywhere, including in their beds and up on the dining room tables, (but not in our homes). and were croaking so loud in the Egyptians' ears (but *we* didn't hear them).

Terrible storms, hail, (but *not* on us). Darkness for days (but *not* inside or outside our homes). Scary things, 10 of them in all.

Finally, Pharaoh really had had enough, and Moses told us to get ready – that we were finally going to leave Egypt.

We could hardly believe it. After so many years as slaves, we were going to be free, and one night, after a strange meal of lamb and some *very* sharp vegetable that stung our mouths, we got up and left.

Just like that.

Thousands and thousands of us.

Out into the wilderness.

We walked and walked. (At first we ran, because we didn't really believe the Egyptians were going to let us go "just like that".) When we got a long way over the border, we slowed down. I was very tired, and, you guessed it! **נחשון/Nachshon** picked me up and carried me for miles and miles, until we got to this *big* body of water with no bridges or ferries or anything like that to take us to the other side.

And worse: Pharaoh and his Egyptians finally woke up to the fact that we were gone, and they were mad that he let us go. So right behind us, and gaining on us, was this huge army of screaming soldiers and neighing and snorting horses and incredibly noisy chariots.

It was terrifying.

They were behind us, and in front of us was this water – I mean it was *right* in front of us, because **נחשון/Nachshon** had carried me to the first row of all those crowds of Hebrews, only putting me down when he got to the water's edge.

It was scary, *very* scary.

I figured that, maybe if *somebody* went into the water, it really would open up a nice dry pathway for all of us to escape, just like we had heard that God told Moses would happen. So I did the only thing *I* knew how to do. ***I just looked up at נחשון/Nachshon and said, "You can do it!" And not five seconds later, he jumped in.****** And, miracle of miracles! the water parted and all of us got through safely to the other side. But the Egyptians were trapped when the sea went back to normal and covered them up.

And, since you wanted to know about me: Here's what happened when I grew up – Years later, I married Aaron. As I said, because my **אבא/Abba** was such an important man, we continued to visit with Miriam and Aaron, and later with Moses, and I guess Aaron began to notice me more because I was no longer a child, and because he had heard about what I had said to **נחשון/Nachshon**.

That's me, little **אלישבע/Elisheva**, wife of Aaron****, mother of four wonderful, *menschlich* sons, Elazar, Itamar, Nadav, and Avihu, daughter of **עמינדב/Aminadav** and **בלפורה/Balfoura**, and most of all, kid sister of **נחשון/Nachshon**.

**Elisheva told me that she especially loved ירושלים של זהב/Yerushalayim Shel Zahav and בשנה הבאה/BaShana HaBa'ah because of its powerful, hopeful message*

***A historical note: This is the historical origin of Legos.*

****Numbers Rabba 13:4:*

קפץ נחשון לתוך גלי הים

Nachshon jumped into the waves of the sea.

*****Exodus 6:23:*

**וַיִּקַּח אֶהָרֹן אֶת־אֵלִישֶׁבַע בַּת־עַמִּינָדָב אַחֹת נַחֲשׁוֹן לֹו לְאִשָּׁה
וַתֵּלֶד לֹו אֶת־נָדָב וְאֶת־אֲבִיהוּא אֶת־אֶלְעָזָר וְאֶת־אִיתָמָר**

*Aaron married Elisheva, daughter of Aminadav, brother of Nachshon.
She gave birth to Nadav, Avihu, Elazar and Itamar.*

45. חנה/Chana Wants A Child

The beginning of חנה/Chana's story of childlessness (*I Samuel 1:1-20*) is a familiar one as we know from other Biblical women, such as רחל/Rachel (whom we ultimately refer to as רחל אמנו/Rachel Immaynu-Mother Rachel).

A childless woman wants to have a child. Her husband אלקנה/Elkanah has two wives, פנינה/Peninnah who has children, and חנה/Chana, who has none. According to the text, Peninnah cruelly taunts Chana, bragging about her status with אלקנה/Elkanah. He is no help, missing the point by saying to Chana,

”הֲלוֹא אֲנִכִּי טוֹב לָךְ מֵעֶשְׂרָה בָּנִים

Aren't I worth as much (more?) to you as ten sons?”

(The nuance of the Hebrew is difficult to ascertain.)

On one of the family's annual pilgrimages to a local temple, חנה/Chana prays directly to God for a son, promising to dedicate him to the service of God. In due time, she gives birth to a son whom she names שמואל/Shmuel-Samuel.

(Aleph) עלי/Eli the Priest and חנה/Chana – The text states that Chana מדברת על לבה, which is usually translated, “She prayed quietly.” (But see my own translation below.) עלי/Eli overhears her, and mistakes her for a drunken woman, as if she were muttering mere nonsense.

However, the Biblical text itself actually describes her emotional state and the underlying reasons four times, sometimes in her own words, for her praying silently:

(1) Verse 10 – וְהָיָא מָרַת נָפֶשׁ – (She prayed to God because)

her entire being was bitter.

(2) Verse 13 – חָנָה הָיָא מְדַבֵּרַת עַל-לִבָּהּ -Now Chana was speaking in her heart with her entire being.

(3) Verse 15 – מְרַב שִׁיחִי וְכַעֲסִי קִשְׁתָּ רוּחַ אֲנִכִּי -My very life-force has been paralyzed, I am in terrible emotional straits, or

(4) Verse 16 – (I was praying spoke) מְרַב שִׁיחִי וְכַעֲסִי because of my profound/utter anguish.

(5) One other phrase (Verse 18) provides an even better picture of Chana as a real human being rather than just some character in an ancient story. Having spoken her words to God, Chana left the place where she prayed and ate, and

וּפָנָיָהּ לֹא-הָיוּ לָהּ עוֹד

and she no longer had her face,

i.e., she was no longer distraught. What this verse means is that Chana was satisfied that she felt that she had conveyed her message/prayer convincingly to God, and is optimistic that God would respond. You could actually see the change on her face.

(Bet) However, my interest is in two other remarkable texts (Brachot 31b):

(A) The content of חנה/Chana's prayer:

אמר רבי אלעזר
מיום שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא את עולמו
לא היה אדם שקראו להקדוש ברוך הוא צבאות
עד שבאתה חנה
וקראתו צבאות

(Noting that Chana had used the word צבאות/tzeva'ot in her prayers),

Rabbi Elazar stated –

From the day the Holy One created the world,

no one had ever called The Holy One צבאות-tzeva'ot

(of the enormous number heavenly bodies [the צבאות-tzeva'ot] that You created),

until Chana called the Holy one צבאות-tzeva'ot.

Based on this, Rabbi Elazar continues to describe the content of her prayer:

אמרה חנה לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא
רבונו של עולם
מכל צבאי צבאות שבראך בעולמך
קשה בעיניך שתתן לי בן אחד

**Chana said to the Holy One,
“Sovereign of the Universe,
of all the innumerable masses of things
that You created in Your universe,
is it so difficult for You to give me one son?”**

I was very struck by her bold — actually *chutzpadik* — argument. Comparing it to some other Biblical prayers, I think it is even more powerful than Abraham’s plea for Sodom and Gemorrah. (*Genesis 18:23-32*)

There is really no defense against Chana’s argument — even for the Holy One.

(B) The second text (on the same page of the Talmud) is as follows:

ונתתה לאמתך זרע אנשים
מאי זרע אנשים
אמר רב: גברא בגוברין
ושמואל אמר: זרע שמושח שני אנשים
ומאן אינון שאול ודוד
ורבי יוחנן אמר: זרע ששקול כשני אנשים
ומאן אינון משה ואהרן
שנאמר: (תהלים צ"ט) משה ואהרן בכהניו ושמואל בקוראי שמו
ורבנן אמרי: זרע אנשים זרע שמובלע בין אנשים
כי אתא רב דימי, אמר
לא ארוך ולא גוץ
ולא קטן ולא אלם, ולא צחור ולא גיחור
ולא חכם ולא טפש

(In Chana’s words),

“Give me a child”.

The Talmud asks, “What does she mean by ‘a child’?”

Rav said, “A great man.”

Shmuel said, “Someone who will anoint two people, i.e.,
King Saul and King David.”

Rabbi Yochanan said, “A child who is of equal importance to two people.

And who are they? Moses and Aaron.”

The Rabbis said, “A child who will be indistinguishable from others.”

When Rav Dimi came (from The Holy Land to Babylonia),

he said that all she meant was,

**“Not too tall,
not too short,
not too skinny,
not too bulky,
neither pale nor ruddy,
not exceptionally bright
nor below normal intelligence”.**

I like Rav Dimi’s insight for two reasons:

(**⚡**) Rav Dimi’s comment makes me think of the great number of stressed-out teenagers who have described to me their years in highschool. The cause is the damaging pressure their parents put on them to get A’s and to engage in multiple extracurricular activities in order to fill their highschool resumé. According to Rav Dimi, Chana, is saving

that an average child would be just fine.

(ב) Only because of conversations with several women who have children, I, as a male, will hesitatingly allow myself to make the following comments: While certainly not true of all women, some have told me how much *they* want to be a mother. For many of these women, it is something deep inside of themselves *as women*. For them, the adjustments, inconveniences, and discomforts of pregnancy and the pain of labor and childbirth are of little consequence. What some of them apparently mean is, “I was given a woman’s body which is meant to give birth. Let me fulfill that purpose.”

(Gimel) Chana clearly is a rightful member of that magnificent **הַבְּרָה/chevra** of extraordinary Biblical women, alongside Pharaoh’s daughter Bityah, the midwives in Egypt, Miriam, Devora, Ruth the Israelite, the former Moabite Princess, and Esther, Queen of the Persians and the Medes.

46. **שְׂרַח בַּת אֲשֵׁר/Serach Bat Asher** **The Grande Dame of The Exodus** **And Esther**

(Aleph) *The Road to שְׂרַח/Serach*

Some time ago, I was trying to figure out who were Amram’s and Yocheved’s oldest, middle, and youngest children. After some discussion, I concluded: Miriam, Aaron, and Moshe.*

Then my mind jumped to **שְׂרַח בַּת אֲשֵׁר/Serach Bat Asher**, whom I had heard about and read about off and on a few years ago.

She is very popular with Jewish feminists, and has been written about too many times to count.**

Some things we ought to know about **שְׂרַח/Serach** are:

Genesis 46:26 records that Jacob’s family that went down to Egypt (not counting his sons’ wives) numbered 66.

In addition to his 12 sons, only Leah’s daughter — **דִּינָה/Dinah** — is mentioned by name. (See her disconcerting story in Genesis Chapter 34.)

In a later census of the various family houses (*Numbers 26*), the verse 26 states **וְשֵׁם בְּתֹאֲשֵׁר שְׂרַח** / (Jacob’s son) **Asher’s daughter’s name was שְׂרַח/Serach**. Statistically, of course, it is unlikely that Jacob had only one granddaughter. But she is Jacob’s only other female “descendant” we know by name.

The sages of the Midrash then followed their hard-and fast rule, “*If it sticks out like a sore thumb, let’s do something with it to teach a Torah Life-lesson.*”

For centuries, these sages were so taken with her that she is described as sister, daughter, (in some Midrash, she was his favorite granddaughter, was actually adopted, and raised by *Sabba/Opa/Abuelo/Zeyde/Grandpa יַעֲקֹב/Ya’akov*, mother, harp player, (beautiful?, stunning?))

There is even a tradition from who-knows-when-and-where, that she is buried in a village 30 kilometers southeast of the Iranian city of Isfahan.***

An additional fact drew the sages’ attention: **שְׂרַח/Serach** was the oldest woman in the Bible mentioned by name whose age is listed. (Sarah died at 127. [*Genesis 23:1*]) We don’t know how long **חַוָּה/Eve**, **עָדָה/Ada**, and **צִלְלָה/Tzilla** or the other unnamed antediluvian females lived. Only the men have names and their ages mentioned in Genesis.

By the shortest calculation in the Torah, **שְׂרַח/Serach** lived more than 215 years .

But, what most attracted *me* about **שְׂרַח/Serach** is in the Midrash (*Derech Eretz*

Zuta, 1): **שרה/Serach** was one of nine human beings in the Bible who entered Paradise alive, meaning not having gone through the common mortal process of dying, and then lived forever in the Garden of Eden, along with **Pharaoh's daughter בתיה/Bitiah**, savior of Moses, no less a hero than the prophet **אליהו/Elijah**, and six other blessed individuals!

(Bet) Picturing שרה/Serach

Serach came with the original clan of The Children of Israel to Egypt at the invitation of Uncle Joseph, the Vizier of Egypt during the famine in the Land of Israel. *And* she was still alive long enough to leave Egypt with the Hebrew masses on the night of the Exodus. I picture her as a five- or six-year-old little girl, either making the journey from the Land of Israel to Egypt, no doubt holding her father **אשר/Asher**'s hand, or according to some texts, her adoptive father's, grandfather **יעקב/Ya'akov**.

What is difficult to picture is this: From such an early age, with eleven uncles and their wives and who-knows-how-many first, second, and third cousins, how crowded and busy was her mind, and was it overloaded with the emotions of the events she experienced?

Among the pictures of **שרה/Serach** that I also have in my mind is this Grand Old Woman sitting around in the evening, any evening, but particularly the night of the Exodus. How many many great-great-great-great-great-grands must have been with her that night in an enormous room! What tales she had to tell them! — The trek from the Land of Israel, how she survived all those years of her heartache over the family's slave labor, and the assurances that, indeed, the people would leave slavery for freedom imminently!

How many were there in that room with **שרה/Serach**?***** What a marvelous scene it must have been with **שרה/Serach**, with all her descendants gathered around this matriarch with the innumerable wondrous stories. By all accounts, she had a prodigious memory and was in complete control of her faculties.

Let us return to her harp-playing for a moment. When the brothers returned from Egypt to tell Jacob that Joseph was, in fact, alive, they were afraid that Jacob's anger would be too fierce to endure because he had not been informed immediately. *So* they asked Asher's daughter and the brothers' niece, **שרה/Serach**, (Jacob's favorite) to play her harp for him, and to sing to him gently, soothingly, which she did, weaving the report about Joseph into the song. It worked. Jacob calmly accepted the news, and was now ready to join Joseph in Egypt because of the famine in the Land of Israel.

He blessed **שרה/Serach**, saying, that *because hers was a message of Life, she should be blessed to live forever*. And *that* is how it happened that she was one of the nine mortals who entered Paradise without dying a human death. (*Midrash Derech Eretz Zuta 1*)

(Gimel) Now, to the reason I wrote this Dvar Torah: The Night of the Exodus

1. The Children of Israel could not leave Egypt unless they found Joseph's bones. They had promised him that when they were to be liberated, they would take his bones back with them to the Promised Land.

2. Who could have possibly known where his bones were, since he had died so long before? Some of our sources (*e.g., Sotah 13b*) record that the Egyptians sank his body in the Nile in an iron coffin. The reason: Either they didn't want the Egyptians to worship him — this man who had saved them from dying of starvation, or because — by contact with his (even-lifeless) presence — or because the waters of the Nile would be blessed because he was such a righteous person.

Here is my real question:

Did שרה/Serach go to Moses or did Moses come to her?

She was just one person out of the hundreds of thousands of The Children of Israel. Is this about The Great Humble One seeking out the Nobody-Special, just Some Old Woman?

There are two versions:

(A). Moses informed by God that the Exodus was imminent ran around

frantically for three days and nights looking for the body of Joseph. Finally he thought to ask **שרח/Serach** who would have seen the funeral and burial — most certainly an unforgettable event.*****

(B). The Midrash states that Serach had also been divinely informed that the Exodus was imminent, so she went to Moses to tell him where to find Joseph's bones.

I have a few questions:

(AA). Why did it take so long for Moses to decide to go to Serach?

(BB). Was he so preoccupied with the logistics of the entire operation of taking them from slavery to freedom that he could not think clearly?

(CC). Did **שרח/Serach** live at the far end of the Hebrews' hovels, and he, 80 years old, found it too wearisome to go there? I think that this is the least likely reason, since the closing verses of the Torah tell us that, when he died at 120, his body was still in full vigor.

(DD). Did she hesitate at first, thinking, "Who am I, just some Old Woman, to play such a part in the history of the Jewish people? Who am I to go to the Great Prophet Moses to tell him that I know what he doesn't know? Wouldn't that be **הוצפה/chutzpah** on a Grand Scale?

I personally like both scenarios: Moses, desperately wanting to fulfill God's instructions, and humble enough to seek out **שרח/Serach**. I really rather doubt that he didn't know who she was and where she lived. *Everyone* must have known about **שרח/Serach**. Moses, I think, just had to focus. He must have simply been too intensely wrapped up in God's Word and the momentous task at hand.

And as for **שרח/Serach**: Well, longevity in and of itself would indicate that that's a reason to pause and contemplate its meaning, but maybe it's nothing especially sublime. What *is* clear to me is that *she somehow knew* that *this* is the reason *why* she had lived to be 215 or 216, and not just to buy Channukah presents, Purim costumes, and birthday gifts for her great-to-the- 8th- or 9th-generation grandchildren, nor receiving the first *Aliya* at their Bnai and Bnot Mitzvah, nor to take her place of honor at who-knows-how-many *brisses*, baby namings, *Pidyon haBens*, and weddings. This hero of ours, *without whom we wouldn't be here today as Jews*, grasped the full theological and existential meaning of her place at this incredible moment in Jewish and world history. No less than Moses.

I think she strode rather vigorously (without a cane or walker) to Moses' home and with great self-assurance said to him,

"Follow me. I know where Joseph is buried.

Come, and then we can all be free."

(Dalet) *Centuries Later*

מרדכי/Mordechai tells Queen **אסתר/Esther** that the Jews are in grave danger and that it is up to her to approach Achashverosh to intercede and save them. He says to her (*Esther 4:14*):

ומי יודע
אם־לעת־קִזְאֵת
הַגְעֵת־לְמַלְכוּת

And who knows?

**Perhaps you have reached your royal position
for just such a historic moment.**

meaning, "**אסתר/Esther**, *This* moment defines the meaning of your life. You are like **שרח/Serach**, the Old Woman of your distant Jewish past who knew where Joseph's bones were buried so the Children of Israel could leave Egypt."

I have no doubts that both **שרח/Serach** and **אסתר/Esther** did all kinds of Mitzvahs all their lives, but this was The Big One.

And centuries later, the Rabbis of the Talmud would teach in a beautifully-

articulated line (*Avodah Zarah 10b, 17a, 18a*):

יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת

There are those who achieve eternity in a single moment.

(Hay) The message

What is the significance of this Talmudic statement for us, the everyday Jews?

I believe that perhaps it may be time to review our own past lives and at the same time look into the future to see if there might not have been or might yet be such personally Ultimate Moments.

(Vav) One Final Scene

Most of us can't shake the images in Cecil B. DeMille's melodrama of *The Ten Commandments*. Who doesn't remember the wildly enthusiastic chattering human masses, the bleating goats and sheep and lowing cattle, *all that noise*, and the overpowering smell of humans and beasts leaving Egypt?

And yet, and yet:

I think something of great importance is missing from the final scene:

In the front of the miles-long line should be Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, of course.

But right there, in Row #1 should be this white-haired woman with wondrously elegant bearing leading them, no less than Moses,
to freedom —

And long, long into the future, to her well-deserved Life Eternal.

**I am sure he was called "The Baby" even when he was 25.*

***The author Thomas Mann wrote a 1200-page book called Joseph and His Brothers. The Nobel Laureate undoubtedly filled in many imaginative details about שררה/Serach.*

Also, someone once told me that a student once wrote a dissertation about her for a PhD degree at Hebrew University.

****I was actually in Isfahan in 1974, but didn't know then about שררה/Serach. Had I known, I certainly would have visited this hero's grave.*

*****To give you an idea of the number, my friend Arnie Draiman once took me to the grave of his uncle. The inscription on the stone stated that he had left more than 400 living descendants.*

******Many people my age remember the unreal solemnity of the moments from the first announcement that President Kennedy had been shot until his burial in Arlington National Cemetery. Details remain in the mind as if they happened yesterday: Millions of Americans sitting hour after hour in front of their television screens, the horse with the boots turned back in the stirrups, the caisson with the coffin ever-so-slowly proceeding from the Capitol over Memorial Bridge then up the hill to the plot in front of the Custis-Lee Mansion.*

I was a student in New York, and there were times when the streets were empty and absolutely silent.

Who can forget that silence?

47. Our Jewish Women and The Golden Calf Incident

(Aleph) The setting — Many students of Jewish texts, learned that, when Aaron asked the people to donate their gold to make the golden calf, the women refused to donate their earrings, bracelets, necklaces, and other jewelry.

(Bet) Some commentators (with a touch of sexist bias) assumed that they refused because, *by their very nature* women love their jewelry and would not want to part with it. However, this couldn't be the real reason, because other texts teach that they readily surrendered their jewelry as donations for the building of the Tabernacle.

A medieval Midrash collection (*Pirkay deRabbi Eliezer, chapter 44*), gives the *real*

underlying reason why they refused: They didn't give to the Golden Calf because they recognized that their jewelry would be used for such a pagan purpose. It would be an act of extreme ingratitude and defiance of the wishes of The Kind God who had provided for the people during their years in the wilderness.

(Gimel) The astonishing reward — Some texts say that they were rewarded by the special rules for them every month on **רֹשׁ חֹדֶשׁ/Rosh Chodesh**, including not having to do any work.

The Yemenite Midrash *Midrash Hagadol (Ki Tissa 32:2)* goes further and says that because of their wise stubborn refusal, **they were allowed to enter the Promised Land.**

This quite radically changes the image of a people about to begin a new life.*

Because the women were already adults when the Golden Calf incident happened, by the time they got to The Land of Israel with Joshua, they were Elders. Among the new immigrants, there would be an enormous number of *bubbies/omas/abuelas/savtas/grandmas* everywhere.

Because of their age and what they had experienced, they could tell the young pioneers the details about their history and heritage: Slavery in Egypt, the travails in the wilderness, the Revelation at Sinai, and — among other things — the Incident of the Golden Calf. This is similar to our grandparents' and great-grandparents' stories, the Ashkenazi immigrants who came from Europe and the Sefardim from Turkey, Iran, North Africa and other countries where they scattered after The Expulsion from Spain and Portugal to cities like Constantinople and Salonika and the island of Rhodes. They would tell their younger descendants what it was like “over there”.**

In contemporary terms, these Elders could communicate their message:

To their **children**, giving them guidance and providing them with the historical context needed to start a new life.

At least equally important — to the **grandchildren**
(as only savtas/bubbas/omas/abuelas/grandmas can)
without having to worry about
all the psychological baggage
that is often a part of parent/child relations.

They might even do it with sweets, a cup of goat milk, and a hug.

The **grandchildren** would then grow up knowing that there is something called unconditional love.

The **grandchildren** would then grow up knowing that Elders have a place in society

and are not to be ignored, disrespected, or hidden away.

And, then, of course, the Elders had would have many other people their age to talk to and many topics which would not interest the younger generations or are not appropriate for children or grandchildren.

because they understood that there is more to Life than just children and grandchildren.

****I always thought that the entire generation that left Egypt would die in the wilderness.***

*****Jews is unaware of, and generally are not interested in, their ancestors' docking in New York, Baltimore, Galveston, or in Canada's Maritimes to begin a new life. Their conscious identity relates only to “over here”.***

48. From 5 to 99: Mitzvah-Lemonade and Organ Recitals

Aleph: The Well-known Quote

הוא היה אומר,
בן חמש שנים למקרא, בן עשר למשנה,
בן שלש עשרה למצוות, בן חמש עשרה לתלמוד,
בן שמונה עשרה לחפה...

He (Yehuda ben Tema) **used to say:**

**At 5 years of age the study of תנ"ך /Tanach-Bible; at 10 the study of Mishnah;
at 13, subject to The commandments; at 15 the study of Talmud;
at 18 the bridal canopy... (Pirkay Avot 5:21)**

Some adjustments are needed: Formal education should begin at an age-appropriate time, allowing for variations in cognitive development, including individuals with special needs; Also, the sage's statement is male-oriented: Even in Talmudic times for the restricted sense of ritual Mitzvahs, a girl's maturity is calculated at 12. And 18 for marriage no longer fits Twenty-First Century reality.

Bet: The Real-Life Situation That Has Always Bothered Me

The Rabbi/teacher/speaker tells his or her highschool audience, "You are the future" referring to creating a better world and a good life for people. This troubles me. The speaker *is* taking into account the teen-agers' vigor applied to doing good (even overcoming raging hormones) and a maturing awareness of the realities of Reality and the nature of human beings. This age group has been our teachers in recycling and environmental issues, among many other common needs-for-solutions. And let us not forget, these precious *kinderlach* who, as it were, were born with a mouse in their hand, and, as a result, have a fixing-the-world electronic reach unimaginable in our wildest fantasies.

But some adjustments to the presentation are needed: Working backwards in age, The speaker is not taking into account the five-year-old child who donates her favorite doll to a victim of hurricane; the speech does not mention the likes of Makenzie Snyder, age 7, who collected and distributed suitcases and duffel bags — more than 2,000 of them, each with a stuffed animal and personal note inside — to foster kids who would carry all their worldly possessions from foster home to foster home in big black garbage bags. And it does not relate how Emma Forstein, also age 7, of Topeka, Kansas, who set up a lemonade stand to raise money for victims of a disaster far away in Oklahoma City. (And who can calculate how many other Mitzvah-lemonade-stands have been set up on front lawns everywhere to collect Tzedakah money for worthy recipients?) These little kids have the advantage of **תמימות/temimut-innocence** unencumbered by too much weight of the world.

And what about the innumerable Bar and Bat Mitzvah Mitzvah projects that have laid the foundations for so much of a *Menschlich* life for thousands of people.

Gimel: Moving Higher in the Age Bracket

Only two examples for college students should suffice: In the '60's, their demonstrations opposing the War in Vietnam and working for civil rights.

For the gen-x and millennials — the depth, variety, and sheer numbers of their methods have certainly accomplished no less.

And then there are the more than 800,000 of them who have been exposed to Israel first-hand for free through Birthright!

Dalet: The Great Leap Forward – Many Years Older

For people born before or around 1965, there are many options in America and elsewhere: Individual free-standing assisted-living and independent-living opportunities, and the millions of older people living in their own houses, condos, or apartments. And a growing proliferation of independent-living *communities*. One that I am familiar with has 3,000 houses and 4,500 residents, and every facility and activity anyone would want: Pickle

ball for fun or heavy competitions, swimming pools, an astonishing number of clubs, and social events of every kind.

One aspect of these individuals' socialization has been dubbed "organ recital". This refers to the topic of every kind of ache or pain, hip and knee replacements, cortisone shots, and transplants, a long list of common and exotic medications, thorough knowledge of subdural hematomas, the intricacies of heart-valve replacements, and 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 bypass surgeries. This conversation can happen at any time, but there are many who ban it at play, meals, and social get-togethers, emphatically putting a stop to it once it begins. ("No strokes or deaths during dinner, please!")

But that is *not* the essence of their lives. It is only a minor downside. I believe, a high percentage does not want to live by the common definition of "retirement". You can readily see it when you read a list of their many clubs and activities that involve making this world better: Political action groups, *chevras* that raise money for people in need throughout their community — and the world — and many, many volunteers for the simplest all the way to the most time-consuming complex situations where people need help.

And *most of all*, they have years of Life-experience from which they have learned to sift through and differentiate between the phony from the real, and the superficial from the deeper, more meaningful use of their time and money. This quote in Job 12:12 applies:

בִּישֵׁשִׁים חֲכָמָה וְאַרְךָ יָמִים תְּבוּנָה:

**In people who have lived many years, there is wisdom,
and a long life brings insight and understanding.**

And, I believe, our context for all age groups, the verse in Deuteronomy 32:7 (with some slight adjustments) is particularly relevant:

זְכֹר יָמוֹת עוֹלָם בֵּינוּ שְׁנוֹת דּוֹר-וָדוֹר
שֶׁאֵל אָבִיךָ וַיְגַדֵּךְ זְקֵנֶיךָ וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָךְ

Ask your father, who will inform you, your elders, who will tell you.

Read "parent" in place of "father". Wisdom and insight about the family ancestry and the way of the world often rests with the female forebears. They remember things and have a perspective on certain events and moments that may escape their partner. What is significant is that their Life-experience and what they transmit to the next generations is no less a crucial message and will help form a plan of action.

I would think that it is worthwhile to consider the vast number of individuals in these communities that are available and that many more of them can be mobilized in so many ways according to their personalities and liking. It's a staggering amount of Good that will benefit everyone.

What I am suggesting is *making a concerted effort* to create bi-directional programs for the sum-total of age groups I have discussed. The 50+ group (not only in the independent living communities, but in synagogues or wherever they may have a *chevra*, may learn of Mitzvah-possibilities that they had not yet heard about, and they, in turn, will share all that they have to teach the younger generations about what they have learned from their years of life-experiences and their own past Mitzvah-work.

Hay: Until When? Let us recall at the extreme other end of the Mitzvah-age spectrum, Clara Hammer, "The Chicken Lady of Jerusalem", who passed away at 99, having continued providing Shabbat and holiday food for a couple of hundred poor families well into her 90's.

Concluding Thoughts

ALEPH: Miracles

In the Torah, one miracle that stands out is God's parting the sea to allow the Children of Israel to escape from the pursuing Egyptian armies. (*Exodus 14:21-22*)

In the Talmud and Midrash, some sages were known as miracle workers, such as Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa (*Sotah 49b*). God always answered their prayers because their purpose was to benefit the people. There were others who were **מלומד בנסים/melumad beNissim-used to miracles happening for them.** (*Shabbat 33b*)

I am ambivalent about wholeheartedly believing in the miracles described above.

However, there are two kinds of miracles that strike deep in my soul:

1. In the עמידה/Amida prayer, we express our thanks ועל נסידך שבכל יום עמנו for your (God's) daily miracles that we experience.

It would not be difficult to make a list of some of these miracles: The very fact that we are alive, that the body is such a complicated yet wonderful "machine", that there is such a thing as friends, and that the earth — one of billions of bodies in the Heavens — tilts on its axis at precisely the right angle. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, ז"ל, sensitized Twentieth Century Jews to the importance of awe and radical amazement, and that it is wise for us to be constantly aware of these miracles. And, in the second half of this memorable quote, Einstein, ז"ל, expressed a similar thought, "There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

These kinds of miracles I can feel and can realistically integrate them into my life.

2. In this anthology, I have recounted many stories of amazing Mitzvahs, and the people who generated these immensely moving acts of kindness. I believe that the general principle was expressed by the Chassidic Rebbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1789-1859) Paraphrasing his Life-lesson:

For people engaged in doing Mitzvahs for others it is not unreasonable to think that miracles may happen.

I believe we can state this as ***The General Principle of Mitzvahs***: Built into the very nature of the Mitzvah-act is enormous potential for making other people's lives better, more whole, and more dignified.

Call Mitzvah-power — sometimes even the most modest act — "miraculous" if you are comfortable with that expression.

Or, if you will, simply call it "astonishing", "amazing" or "awesome".

Whatever your description, ***you just never know*** what will come of it.

These kinds of miracles I have witnessed, read about, and heard about. My soul comfortably tells me they are miraculous, and can easily integrate them into my life.

BET: A Final Concluding Thought

It would seem to me that it would be good for us to always remain aware of the part Mitzvahs can play in our lives. By occasional, part-time, or complete devotion to doing Mitzvahs, however or whenever, on a minute scale or with a Grand Vision, you may — and are entitled to — experience miraculous results. ***You just never know.***

GIMEL: Faulkner's concise, yet profound and all-inclusive words:

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner described the Grand Sweep of Life, history, human beings, and Mitzvahs in two beautiful sentences:

I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

Doing Good combines Danny Siegel's profound and extensive knowledge of ancient Jewish texts on giving, with his passion for finding and supporting the people who best exemplify those texts. The result is a book that shows us how to do good and in doing so bring meaning and purpose to our lives. Timely and timeless, this book calls to us to change the world for better and points to the myriad of ways in which we can relieve suffering when we learn how to 'think *Mitzvahs*'.

Anne Andrew PhD,
former Principal Temple Sholom Religious School, Vancouver, BC,
author of *What They Don't Teach in Prenatal Class:
The Key to Raising Trouble-Free Kids and Teens*

Danny Siegel, our favorite teacher of Mitzvot and friend to great Mitzvah Heroes has once again graced us with wonderful words and deeds of Torah to deepen our understanding, to inspire us, and especially *to encourage us do something good for someone else* — and for ourselves! He leads us, Talmudic-like, onto a personal journey of contemporary understanding and practical action. Whatever good you were doing before you read his most recent two-volume collection Doing Good and Jewish VIP's—Values, Ideas, and Principles, you will do even more following studying these texts. He gently probes our inner conscience to do the right things—always.

Even greater than the classic command to “Learn Torah,” Danny evokes in us the Hassidic exhortation to “Be Torah”. Learning texts by themselves is not enough; one needs to exemplify Jewish values in all that one does. His two latest books are wonderful guides in that process.

Rabbi Jonathan Porath

Danny sees the light of Torah and rays of Jewish values shining through in situations that might strike others as ordinary and mundane. He captures this light and shares it beautifully in his divrei Torah, demonstrating that Judaism is not only what we do in our synagogues or in our homes, but that Judaism can and should be lived in all moments of our lives, wherever we may find ourselves.

Mitchell Berkowitz, Associate Rabbi
B'nai Israel Congregation, Rockville, Maryland

For over 40 years, I have been a student of Danny Siegel's teachings and writings. He brings his incredible poetry and prose to promote interpersonal mitzvot, the giving of tzedaka, and an approach to human kindness based in Torah teachings and on living personalities who exemplify these actions. Welcome to another anthology of Danny's Torah...you will actually hear his voice teaching as you read this work.

Rabbi Arnold Samlan
Chief Jewish Education Officer
Broward County, FL, Federation