

We Can Always Do More
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Three men are on a deserted island. A genie pops out of a bottle that washes ashore and grants each of them a single wish. The first guy says: "I wish I was home." And in an instant, he was. The second man also expresses that same wish. And in the blink of an eye, he was home as well. This third guy looks around and says: "Gee, I sure do miss those guys. I wish they were right back here -- with me!"

Sometimes, what we say, is not what we truly mean...and sometimes, what we mean, is not what we truly say. For example, how often have you had a family member or friend, like perhaps the one sitting right next to you, say something like, "You know, I feel very Jewish in my heart, but I'm really not all that religious." Really? You're here, aren't you? On one of the holiest days of the year?!

As a rabbi of the Reform Movement, I hear that comment as often as you do; probably even more, much more, than you do. I have even heard it uttered by many of the lay leaders of the various synagogues in which I've served, over a course of a quarter century in the Reform Rabbinate. I have heard that comment shared with me, at some point, by virtually every Temple President alongside of whom I've had the privilege of leading our sacred congregations and communities.

And yet, I can tell you, regarding these Temple Presidents, lay leaders, and other proud Reform Jews, almost to a one, that I've never met a more religiously motivated group of individuals in all my life. Though they may not win any awards for perfect attendance at services, they continue to serve our faith with honor, in their service to others: Whether they are serving soup to the housebound, or delivering free medical care to those without health insurance; whether they are building homes for the homeless, or organizing our annual run to raise funds, to deliver comfort to the hungry and the hopeless; or whether they are defending our civil rights and liberties, or speaking out in support of all who wish to live in loving relationships, without regard to gender or orientation; whether they are giving shelter and sustenance to those in recovery, or assisting others in their journey of bandaging the broken fragments of their lives; whether they are caring for the elderly, or visiting the infirm; whether they are consoling the bereaved, or attempting to make peace, wherever there is strife.

To a one, I would tell you, they are inspired by the prophetic ideals of our tradition, even as their lives -- to a one, I would argue -- might serve as an extremely religious source of inspiration for the lives of others. They say what they mean, and even more, they mean what they say. To a one, they do more than merely talk the talk: they walk the walk; they walk humbly with their God, with our God, acting as God's agents, or angels, in this world of theirs, and ours.

(You know) all too often, we allow others' views of religion, to define our concept of a religious life; we forget that, as Reform Jews, we have always valued behavior over belief, and collective social justice over the individualized, often solitary spiritual journeys. Often, we fail to value

ourselves of possessing true religious worth; we continue define our faith, and ourselves, and even to often allow others define us, solely through the lens of observance, rather than through the lens of service to others. In doing so, we do more than diminish ourselves: We make a massive mistake. We cede the moral high ground to those who may pray more, versus those who might do more. We allow the letter of Jewish law, to overtake its underlying motivation and spirit.

And still, I would tell you, we can always do more. If we accept the premise that our behavior defines our religious value base, more than our expressions of prayer or belief...we can always do more, whether here, at home, or halfway around the world...we can always do more.

For example, have you met “The Cake Lady” yet? Have you heard about her? She was featured in a movie that premeired at our Nashville Jewish Film Festival this past year. The film was directed by our own Adam Hirsch, a proud graduate of our Temple’s religious School; the film won the award for best documentary at this year’s Atlanta Jewish Film Festival. Is she religious, or not? You tell me. But first, let me tell you about her.

The film highlights the simple acts of kindness of a sweet Jewish woman: She bakes cakes, by the dozen, and by the hundreds and the thousands over time. She uses the same recipe, delivering the same mixture of sugar and sweetness to countless individuals, both those known and unknown, who have either touched her life, or whose lives have been touched by her. She has developed a particular fondness for first responders, for those who defend and protect others from harm’s way.

She continues to do throughout the years, despite the disappointments and the losses endured in her own life; she continues to find life’s deepest meaning and richest joy, in bringing a dose of happiness and hope to all those who might most benefit from it. Neither the loss of a devoted husband, after decades of marriage; nor the death of a son, killed in a horrific mass shooting in Atlanta; nor the infirmities of age; nor the relocation from her home to a senior residence; none of it precludes her or deters her from her appointed rounds.

She is, in short, the quintessential example of menschlichkeit, of extending oneself for others, selflessly and tirelessly. For her, there is always more to be done for others, more acts of goodness, graciousness, kindness and love that she can do to give her life meaning and add meaning to the lives of others.

To me, she embodies the essence of what it means to be a faithful Jew: Not ritual, but a religious obligation to lift the lives and the spirits of others; not worship or prayer alone, but rather, an unwavering sense of working to bring comfort and consolation to others; not piety of belief, but a purity, of heart, and of spirit, one that actively embraces and uplifts every human soul, at every turn, every day, in tangible and meaningful ways.

So you tell me: Is she religious, or not? Are you? Are we? What might we bring to others, what might we offer them that might ease their pain, or affirm their worth, or comfort them in struggles? Making a meaningful difference in the lives of others, can their be a greater piety of

faith than that? As Buber once said, “ When two people relate to each other authentically and humanely, God is the electricity (that extends) between them.

But here’s the thing: We can always do more. That is the working title of both the opening and the closing chapters of the Book of Life: We can always do more, to enrich the lives of others. We can choose to do good...or we can choose to do nothing.

This holds true for each of us: We are written into the Book of Life, and blessing, by the ways in which we open our hearts to the lives of others, and open our spiritual homes, to bring the blessings of safety and sanctuary to all those who are in need, whose lives we touch. As Longfellow reminds us: We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us, by what we’ve already done.

(But) To engage in performing acts of goodness, when we are comfortable with the task, is easy; to undertake this mission, becomes increasingly more difficult, when it makes us uncomfortable or vulnerable; and when it becomes daunting, that is the ultimate test of our character, religious and otherwise. And, I can assure you, this remains true, whether one occupies the pulpit...or the pew.

One of my favorite stories in this regard comes from the National Public Radio series called “This I Believe”. The writer, Dierdre Sullivan, opens her account with the same sentence as the one used to entitle the essay: “Always go to the Funeral”.

“I Believe in always going to the funeral”, she begins, “ My father taught me that.”The first time he said it directly to me, she says, I was sixteen and trying to get out of going to (visitation) hours for my old fifth-grade math teacher. I did not want to go. My father was unequivocal. Dee, he said, you’re going. Always go to the funeral. Do it for the family.

So my dad waited outside while I went in. It was worse than I thought it would be: I was the only kid there. When the condolence line deposited me in front of of Miss Emerson’s shell-shocked parents, I stammered out, “Sorry about all this,” and stalked away. But, for that weird expression of sympathy delivered twenty years ago, Miss Emerson’s mother still remembers my name and always says hello with tearing eyes.

Sounds simple -- she writes -- when someone dies, get into your car and go to the funeral. That, I can do. But I think a personal philosophy of going to funerals means more than that, she concludes:

“Always go to the funeral” means that I have to do the right thing when I really, really don’t feel like it. I have to remind myself of it when I could make some gesture, but I don’t really have to and I definitely don’t want to. I’m talking about those things that represent only inconvenience to me, but (which mean) the world to the other guy. You know, the painfully underattended birthday party. The hospital visit (that falls) during happy hour. The shiva call for one of my ex-uncles. In my humdrum life, the daily battle hasn’t been good versus evil. It’s hardly so epic. Most days, my real battle is in doing good versus doing nothing.

Sometimes, doing good might mean doing something difficult. It might involve comforting the bereaved, or visiting the sick. That is the real test of religious faith, whether we choose to go, or not; whether we choose to act, or not; whether we choose to do good, or choose to do nothing.

Rabbi Harold Kushner used to loathe making hospital visits. He used to feel inadequate in those hospital rooms, at the patients' bedsides. What can I bring them -- healing? Maybe, he thought; but often, he felt more like he would be seen more as the "malach hamaves" -- as the angel of death -- than as a positive angelic messenger.

But over time, and over the course of staying the course, his attitude began to evolve, and change. "What can I bring them -- healing?", he would say to himself. Maybe. "Comfort -- without question", he would conclude. Care? That, too. Love? Without end.

And something else, as well: "The person who is seriously ill feels punished by God; our presence with them, next to them, let's them know that they are not alone, that God, through us, is with them, too." And there is a blessing that we say right there, and then, with them: "Ha-Noten la'ayef Koach" -- Blessed are you, O God, who gives strength to the weary." The strength may be given by God; but the strength of God's touch, of His gentle caress, that can only come through us. (Kushner, CCAR 3/12)

This, to me, is the essence of what defines a religious person; this, to me, is what constitutes a religious life. This is how a Jew best measures the worth of his life, and how, I believe, God best measures us. We can choose to do good...or we can choose to do nothing.

As one congregant of a reform congregation in Los Altos Hills, CA, who is involved in care and concern efforts in her synagogue, shares: As I thought about why we do what we do -- visit the sick, comfort the mourners, rejoice with bride and groom, welcome a newborn -- I was reminded of what it means to be part of a religious community.

She continues: I have friends who often say, "I'm spiritual, but not religious." As I see it, you can be spiritual alone, you can meditate, you can sit on a rock and contemplate the eternal, but you have no obligations. Being religious has a spiritual component, but it carries obligations to other people.

As the author Ann Lamott writes: The people in faith communities follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful. She quotes a text from the Jewish Theological Seminary as well: A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be part of a great meaning."

We can choose to do good...or we can choose to do nothing. We can always do more.

And, finally, there is this: In the aftermath of the Boston Bombing, Rabbi Shai Held offered these insightful comments about how we can always do more, and why our faith demands no less of us. He writes about the "first responders", about those who engage in the sacred work that borders on the work of angels, but which is often counterintuitive to us, as mere mortals:

“Just who are these people”, he writes, “ doing the holiest thing a human being can do: running towards the injured and dead, instead of running away from (the danger) and from them?”

“There is something about seeing first responders going about their work that restores our hope in humanity. Just as importantly, “he continues, “there is something about them that can teach us a lesson in theology.”

Faced with a situation that makes us stare our own vulnerability in the face, most of us want to flee. To do so is human nature, to protect ourselves from harm’s way; Judaism reminds us that religious faith -- that our very our humanity -- requires of us the exact opposite of us. As Rabbi Held concludes, “ Here, then, is Judaism’s message: You want to serve God? Run towards the people and places you want to run away from. You want to be religious? Learn to be present for other people when they are in pain. All the rest is commentary. (Tablet magazine, 4/18/13)

What will we choose to do, in the year ahead, to make our behavior more fully reflective of our religious belief? Who will we run towards, to uplift and embrace, to offer comfort and consolation? And no matter what we already may have done, let us acknowledge, we can always do more...What shall it be? We can choose to do good...or we can choose to do nothing.

No one ever wants to go a funeral, or to stumble and search for the right words to say to those who mourn ; no one rushes to spend time with someone lying in a hospital room, or a hospice bedside ; no one relishes the thought of running towards a difficult situation or a potentially dangerous place...but Judaism insists that we do so anyway; Judaism insists that we do just that. Because its not all about us; its all about doing even more for others, despite our reservations, in spite of our hesitations and without consideration of our limitations. We can always do more. That is how we define our faith; that is how we practice it best. That what makes us who we are; and that is what brings us back, year after year, to this sacred place, and to this sacred faith: Remembering, that we serve our God best, through service to our fellowman; and by remembering, that we can always do more. Amen.