



SMALL ACTS

Yom Kippur Sermon 5780/2019 Rabbi Zoë Klein Miles

They say hindsight is 20/20, but this is 2019. 2020 is before us. So this year, foresight is 20/20. The vision is clear. We can see the future.

We think about this past year, the parade of atrocities that marched across our screens. Every time there was a new low and we thought things couldn't go any lower, it plummeted further. The future looks bleaker and bleaker. A pollution-choked dystopia, an absurd idiocracy, Manhattan, San Diego and all of Indonesia underwater, yet everyone is dehydrated because none of it is potable, bees are extinct, paradise is paved, there are no fruit or flowers, school teachers carry guns and no one feels safe. Envisioning that future, we feel hopeless and helpless.

You've seen those movies in which characters go back in time and they are told, "Don't disturb a single thing. If you even step on an ant you alter the whole continuum of time. Agitate anything and you initiate a trajectory of change. Every little thing you do disrupts the story and has an immense impact on the future."

Our ancestors had a vision of a future that was radically different than anything around them. A time when goodness triumphs and peace reigns. Our sages discussed and debated how to build it, using Torah as the blueprint. They realized that its foundation is individual action and accountability. They gave us *mitzvot* to observe. They gave us *g'milut hasadim*, acts of loving kindness to perform. They bequeathed to us a hunger for justice and righteousness. They said everyone is made in God's image. They spoke of equality, liberty, democracy. It was a big dream, and it would take hundreds of generations to realize it. They invented a future, and then they sent angels to make it happen.

We are the emissaries of that dreamed-of future. Every good deed we do, every small act, alters the continuum of time, initiates a trajectory of change, disrupts the bleak story of humanity's self-destruction, and brings us closer to redemption.

Every small act contributes to rewriting the script, rerouting destiny.

Each year our fourth-grade religious school learns about homelessness and visits homeless shelters. Parents come to the temple at 6 in the morning to make pancakes to bring. One particular year the students brought stamps and markers and made Thanksgiving cards for the residents. One father quipped, "This is ridiculous! A card isn't going to make a difference in their lives." As it turned out, his son made a card and handed it to a resident. That resident stood up and spoke. He said, "My life was so good until the day my child died. I could not recover from the grief. I lost my job. I lost my home. I lost my wife. This is the first time since I lost my child that a child has given me something." And he touched his heart, and wept.

It was a lesson, but the father was right in a way. In the big picture, what difference does it make? Does that scribble-scrabble Thanksgiving card end homelessness? Does it make a dent in alleviating poverty in Los Angeles, in the country, in the world? No.

But did it warm the chill off a shivering soul, did it put a single stitch on a broken heart? Did it matter? Yes.

In the book "The Fragility of Goodness: Why Bulgaria's Jews Survived the Holocaust", author Tzvetan Todorov sought to understand why Bulgaria was one of only two countries allied with Nazi Germany that did not annihilate or turn over its Jewish population. He showed that Bulgaria was not heroic or drastically different from those countries where Jews perished. Rather, the survival of 50,000 people was the result of a very delicate, tenuous chain of events. If one small act had been missing from the chain, it would have turned out very differently. He concludes that "once evil is introduced into public view, it spreads easily, whereas goodness is temporary, difficult, rare and fragile."

That audacious, inspired future that our ancestors envisioned, it is reached by a delicate, tenuous chain of events. All of our small acts matter. Each small act is another stitch in mending the torn fabric of our world. Each small act averts escalating immorality and chaos.

We heard so much hopelessness this year. Despair over the chasms between us, the corruption around us. Often people came to clergy dispirited, despondent. And we would create sacred space, sitting together, listening, comforting. And then after tears and tissues, we'd leave our little private pod, and reemerge into the temple. And walking through the temple, you can't help but marvel at the way our community teems with kindnesses.

People sharing homemade honey cakes, or bringing figs and tomatoes from their gardens. Coming early to set up for an event. Inviting a first-time visitor to sit for a shabbat meal. Opening their homes for gatherings and discussions. Delivering chicken soup to someone who is ill. Teaching a student to chant a prayer for their bar mitzvah, letter by letter, word by word. A smile at the gate. Holding open the door. Holding each other through the shadows, dancing together in the light. The abundance of small selfless acts is the refutation of hopelessness.

And all those countless kindnesses knit together. Teenagers helping elementary students in our Rishonim program. Members of T.I.N.G., Temple Isaiah's Networking Group making referrals to each other's businesses. Shabbat greeters, High Holy Day ushers welcoming and assisting, members of ChaiVillageLA supporting each other with check-in calls, friendly visits, rides to the doctor, along with social and educational programs, members of Isaiah Women and Isaiah's Men's Group building and deepening relationships. Board members delivering apples and honey to members who lost a loved one this year. Parents packaging cards and plastic shofars to send to Isaian youth who are just starting their freshman year of college. Blessing a newborn baby. Singing softly at the bedside of one at life's end.

These kindnesses knit together, hook and loop, and a tapestry is formed, and it spreads out, a *sukkat shalom*, a shelter of peace. Participants in the Family Philanthropy Club do acts of community service throughout the city throughout the year. Congregants providing mentorship to underserved students through Roots & Wings. Am Tzedek: Isaians Pursuing Justice partnering with One-LA to unite different faith communities to stand up against some of society's greatest ills. Our Green Team keeping climate change at the forefront of our concerns. Members bringing goods for SOVA, helping the homeless, collecting clothing. Members fighting against slavery and trafficking. Members raising funds for research. Members training to get out the vote. Members marching together. Members writing to politicians. Members traveling together to speak up in Sacramento, in Washington DC.

Small acts matter. One vote. One plastic bottle. One starfish returned to the ocean.

Sometimes one small act builds exponentially until it becomes a phenomenon. Greta Thunberg sat alone outside the Swedish Parliament in August, 2018. And she created a ripple which over the course of a year created mass global climate protests around the world. She called her movement #FridaysforFuture.

Today is #YomKippurforFuture. On this day we roll up our sleeves and rewrite the script. But first we have to envision the good ending. Once we have that, every other decision should be purposeful, intentional, moving us toward that goodness, not distracted by any number of diversion tactics.

Greta Thunberg started with a small act, agitated the norms, and initiated a trajectory of change.

We may feel helpless and hopeless at times, but intrinsically we each have immeasurable worth, and our actions, however small, matter.

The central belief in Judaism is that all human beings are made “in the image of God.” That is key to the future our ancestors envisioned. The Torah begins with the story of the creation of all people, not just our own. We all share the same ancestry. We affirm that God is One, and that we are each made in the image of that One God. We emphasize the infinite value of the one.

We do not believe that anyone is disposable. Disabled, elderly, incarcerated, different, we remember our shared ancestry, and we strive to see in every face the reflection divine.

The rabbis say, “Whoever destroys one life is as if they destroyed an entire world, and whoever preserves a life is as if they preserved the entire world.” (Sanhedrin 4:5)

The homeless man who was handed a Thanksgiving card had lost a child, and it destroyed his world.

Over the course of one week this year in March, there were three suicides, linked in a terrible way. One was the father of one of the victims of the Sandy Hook shooting. Another was a student who survived the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School. And then, a student who survived the shooting in Parkland. Worlds collapsing.

In April, a man opened fire in a synagogue during a Passover service in Poway, killing Lori Gilbert-Kaye.

Lori’s sister had been a member of Temple Isaiah for a long time. I sat up that night thinking of what to write to her. I wrote:

There is, and will be, so much talk about the mounting shooting tragedies, lists of houses of worship in our country and around the world that have been targeted. There are lists of fatalities and lists of wounded. But the lists all fail to express the infinity of the one. One woman, who is mother of Hannah, wife of Howard, sister of Randi, sister-in-law of John, aunt of Gabe and Alexandra, daughter, community member, unique, beautiful, singular, kaleidoscopic, outstanding, individual, ineffable, soulful, spirited, vibrant, creative, cherished and cherishing, a life of harmonies and symphonies, cascades and crescendos, and sudden silence, mid-song.

I don't know how to interpret such a catastrophic event. It is a Big Bang, the catalyst of a new dark and terrible universe whose laws are upside down, absurd and wrong.

One of the many small acts of kindness Lori did in her life was to volunteer for the annual Friendship Walk to benefit people with disabilities. This summer at the walk, Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein said, "Today's walk is dedicated to [Lori], because it commemorates her goodness and random acts of kindness."

This day is often symbolized by scales, and we pray that some small act of kindness will tip the scales in our favor. In our prayer books we find the words, "*Teshuva*, *Tefillah* and *Gemilut Chasadim* can change a severe decree." Repentance, prayer and acts of kindness can change a severe decree.

But these things did not save Lori, and she was observant, and performed acts of kindness. Nor did it save Sandeep Dahliwal from being ambushed and shot. Dahliwal wanted to make a difference in the city he grew up in and became the first Sikh police officer in Houston. He lived every day in service of others and proudly wore his turban to symbolize his commitment to equality for all.

So what do all of those little kindnesses matter if in the end evil spreads so easily, and goodness is temporary, difficult, rare and fragile?

Well, they don't just matter. They are the heart of the matter. Goodness is why we are here, for goodness sake. It is our very purpose. Our ancestors had a God-given vision of a future, a time when goodness triumphs and peace reigns, and their prayers released angels to make it happen. We are those angels. That is why we are here. We are the emissaries of that dreamed-of future. And every good deed we do, every small act, alters the continuum of time, initiates a trajectory of change, brings humanity closer to redemption.

During the Passover seder, we traditionally open the door two times. The first time is when we declare, "Let all who are hungry come and eat!" And the second time is when we welcome the prophet Elijah. However, the two are linked. The doorway is empty both times. If we aren't helping the hungry to eat, we aren't bringing redemption any closer. When we alleviate pain, we are the angel at the door. When we warm the chill off of one shivering soul, put a single stitch on a broken heart, it matters.

Our celestial resume is made up of all our small acts. Judaism, perhaps because of our historic lack of power, finds power in small acts, in individual exchanges of kindness.

Right before Rosh Hashana, a poem was published in the New York Times called Small Kindnesses. Which was ideal because I was working on a sermon about small kindnesses. The poem is by Danusha Lameris. It reads:

I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
have my seat," "Go ahead — you first," "I like your hat."

Our small kindnesses count and are counted. They are the "catalog of encouragements" that hold community close. We can't always see the trajectory of our small acts. We do not know which of our small acts in an accumulation of small acts saves a life, how it contributes to the future we are praying for and working toward.

And this includes the kindness we show ourselves.

We are here to change the future. We are the characters sent back in time and told, "Disturb things. Protect a bee and alter the whole continuum of time. Agitate, and initiate a trajectory of change."

We are made in God's image, and God bestows upon us endless acts of kindness each moment, oxygen, beating heart, senses, a soul, nature's majesty, lips to praise.

May we look into the not too distant future, with our 20/20 vision, crystal clear, and see there the triumph of goodness, the reign of peace, and let us devote ourselves to being the angels that lead us there, one small act of kindness at a time.