

One day, a long time ago, there was a train travelling from the Eastern European village of Salant to Vilna. A man on the train lit a cigar. (Back then, you could smoke on trains.)

As he sat smoking his cigar, another man stomped over to him and angrily yelled, “Why do you need to fill up this entire car with smoke?! Not all of us want to breathe in your dirty air!”

The man with the cigar felt terrible. After the angry man stomped back to his seat, the man put out his cigar and opened a window on the train to try and clear out the smoke.

Minutes later the angry man returned and demanded, “Why do you need to open the window and make all of us cold?!”

The other man was embarrassed, felt terrible, and closed the window.

When they reached Vilna and the men exited the train a huge crowd of people were there to meet the man with the cigar.

The angry man asked one of the people in the crowd, “Who is that?”

“You don’t know? That’s Rav Yisrael Salanter.”

[Rav Yisrael is known as the father of the *Musar* movement. *Musar* is the study and practice of Jewish ethics.]

The man felt horrible. He began crying and ran over to Rav Yisrael Salanter, “I’m so sorry for yelling at you and embarrassing you on the train.”

Rav Yisrael promptly forgave him.

The man continued, “I have no job and no livelihood. I have come to Vilna because I need a job. I want to be a *shochet*, a *kosher* meat slaughterer, but I need to get a license.”

“Well, my son-in-law happens to be a rabbi in Vilna. Let me write you a recommendation and you can go to him to take the test for your license.”

The man thanked Rav Yisrael for his kindness. He went to Rav Yisrael’s son-in-law, took the test...and failed miserably.

When Rav Yisrael heard that the man had failed he set him up with teachers to guide him on how to be a *shochet*. The man continued to study with his teachers and eventually he passed the test.

After he passed the test, the man returned to Rav Yisrael and said, “You were so kind to forgive my poor behavior on the train. And I know that when someone apologizes we are supposed to forgive them. But why did you go out of your way to help me afterwards, particularly after the horrible way I treated you?”

Rav Yisrael responded, “Anyone can say, ‘I forgive you.’ But the only way for me to truly forgive you was for me to learn to like you. Only then would the words, ‘I forgive you,’ be true.¹

¹ Rav Yisrael story adapted from various sources.

We have all done things to push others' buttons and we have all had our buttons pushed.

We have been the man smoking the cigar.

And the man angry about the smoke.

We have tried to fix our mistakes and have still been yelled at.

And we have yelled at those who have tried to help us.

We have heard, "I'm sorry," and responded, "I forgive you."

We have *said*, "I'm sorry," and *heard*, "I forgive you."

And, for most of us, if we *even* get that far, that's where the story ends.

We have been trained from a very young age to ask forgiveness—to mumble to the person we've offended saying, "I'm sorry," and grumbling back, "I forgive you." And, sometimes, we truly mean it.

But we seldom go beyond that step. We so rarely engage in actions that elicit the response, "But why did you go out of your way to help me afterwards, particularly after the horrible way I treated you?"

It is so out of our comfort zones to offer in excess what Rav Yisrael offered. But what exactly was he offering? Love? Kindness? Grace? Compassion?

The English language doesn't really have a word outlining Rav Yisrael's actions. But Judaism does. It is called *chesed*.

The 12th century philosopher, Maimonides, taught that *chesed* is the act of giving in excess of what is required. This can be either giving in excess to someone *to whom we have no obligation* or *giving to someone who deserves something from us, but giving them more than they deserve.*²

Chesed is going out of our way to help others, regardless of the way they have treated us, to treat them generously and with kindness, even if our gut tells us to do otherwise.

And even though *chesed* is giving in excess, *seemingly* more than is necessary, it is in fact *so* necessary that the book of Psalms says, “*Olam chesed yibaneh*”, “The *whole world* is built on *chesed*.”

² Maimonides, Guide of the Perplexed, 3:53 as translated in [file:///Users/rachelackerman/Downloads/WLS2014%20Held%20Olam%20Chesed%20Yibaneh%20\(1\).pdf](file:///Users/rachelackerman/Downloads/WLS2014%20Held%20Olam%20Chesed%20Yibaneh%20(1).pdf).

If the whole world is built on *chesed*, then what does it mean when it has become the norm for us to:

- Roll our eyes at what others say in meetings when they don't share our views
- Constantly interrupt one another
- Use social media as a platform to offer our thoughts with no regard to others feelings
- Speak harshly toward each other
- Allow our phones to take priority over the people sitting right in front of us
- Shame people *in front of others*
- Allow our own fears and biases to guide whether we respond to those in need
- Bully people
- Physically harm, or even kill others, because we don't like who they are

If our whole world is built on acts of over-abundant lovingkindness, then what kind of world are we living in when these acts are so incredibly absent?

I'm not suggesting that we don't do good in this world.

We do remarkable things.

We, in this very community, are really good at *tzedek* (justice) and *tzedakah* (righteous giving). During my time here I have watched as we've

- fought for marriage equality and the rights of DREAMers
- donated countless dollars to student-led initiatives in support of sending Malaria nets across the world or to realize equality at the Western Wall
- Sponsored a refugee family from Syria, giving far more items than needed to furnish their home and supporting them so that they can start a new life in America.

We do an exceptional job at *tzedek* and *tzedakah*. We work tirelessly at realizing justice in this world.

But *tzedek* is not enough.

Montgomery County Public Schools recently had two very different headlines in the *Washington Post* local education section:

- One (featuring Temple Shalom's very own Jacob Rains!): School adopts gender-neutral homecoming court, so there might be no 'king' or 'queen'
- And another: Middle school girl records classmates chanting racial slur during bus ride home

We do justice.

But, we are sorely misguided when it comes to *chesed*.

And, if the world is built on *chesed*, on what foundation are our acts of justice standing?

Certainly not a strong one.

Rav Yisrael acted with *chesed* to a man who had no claim on him. To a man who owed him nothing, and to whom he owed nothing, and frankly, who really didn't deserve his audacious kindness.

And *we* struggle in offering *chesed* to our *peers* and *colleagues*, forget about offering *chesed* to those who anger us, hurt us, insult us, brush us aside, who we perceive as not liking us...who *we* don't like.

And *chesed* goes beyond just being kind.

Chesed is not: If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all.

Chesed is: If you don't have anything nice to say, find something nice to say anyway. And then do something nice. And try to learn to like the person about whom you had nothing nice to say in the first place.

Amongst a litany of laws and *mitzvot* outlined in the book of Exodus, we find the following:

“When you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless raise it with him.”³

This *mitzvah* could be fairly intuitive and obvious. Relieve an animal from an undue burden. But with the addition of the word “enemy” this task becomes so much harder. Our natural inclination is to cheer for our enemy’s loss, to think, “serves you right.”

But that’s not the Jewish way. The Jewish response to seeing suffering related to your enemy is to act with *chesed toward* your enemy.

It’s counterintuitive, and perhaps, for this reason, we find it so difficult to do.

And yet, we are commanded to find a way to be kind.

³ Exodus 23:4-5

In an address to his students, Rabbi Brad Artson, Dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, offered a teaching of Reb Simcha Zissel Zieb. Reb Zieb was a student of Rav Yisrael of the train story.

Reb Zieb taught that all of the *mitzvot*, Judaism's holidays, rituals, and observances, exist exclusively to prepare us to fulfill the *mitzvah* of lifting the burden of our enemy's donkey, to move beyond our natural impulse to say, "Not only do I not care that it's my enemy's donkey suffering, I'm glad that it's suffering."

That means, our prayers on these holidays, our lighting of candles, our giving of *tzedekah*, our baking *challah*, our building a *sukkah*, our hearing the *shofar*, our study, must be done because they prepare us to act from a place of *chesed*. They exist solely so that we can learn to turn to our enemy and offer them more than what they need, and certainly far more than our natural inclination tells us they deserve.

Rabbi Artson continued by expounding on a *midrash* from *Kohélet Rabbah* where Rabbi Yehudah teaches, "*She'kol hakofer b'gmilut chesed k'ilu kofer b'ikar.*" "Anyone who denies the centrality of *chesed*, it is as if they [are a *kofer b'ikar*, one who has]...denied the whole thing."

A *kofer b'ikar*, is someone who has denied the very building blocks of Jewish religion and that person is no longer to be treated legally as a Jew.

If you neglect to put *chesed* at the core of your interactions, *you are no longer legally considered a Jew.*

Rabbi Artson continues, "We have an obligation in our community to ask ourselves how do we calibrate to give *chesed* the centrality it deserves. It's not just one Jewish value among many. It's the basis of all Jewish expression and without it the rest means nothing."⁴

⁴ Rabbi Brad Artson: <http://www.zieglertorah.org/2015/01/28/hesed-covenantal-deeds-of-love-rabbi-brad-artson/>

If every single *mitzvah* exists solely so that we can learn to relieve the burden of our enemy's donkey, then what *mitzvot* do we need to practice in this new year to move us toward *chesed*?

Does coming to services make you feel like a more centered person?

Does kneading and braiding *challah* dough give you an opportunity to think about what you need to do to be a kinder human being?

Does giving *tzedakah* to perfect strangers allow you to reflect on the areas in which you need to offer beneficence to those regularly in your midst?

Does study inspire you to do *chesed*?

Do the smell of spices and the glow of the twisted *havdallah* candle remind you of the ways you need to contribute more sweetness to this world?

If these are the things that prepare us to do *chesed*, then we must do them, and we *must* do them *often*.

Recently I watched as one of our younger students, on his very first night of school, observed an older student, who he didn't know, wanting to buy some pizza, but she didn't have any money. He walked over to her and offered her \$2—an act of kindness to someone who had no claim on him. No one would have thought twice about him not offering money. But *everyone* noted the kindness offered when he did.

To *think*, an act of *chesed* can be as simple as that.

It can be wishing *Shanah Tovah*, a Happy New Year, to someone who hurt us...and inviting them to come over for a holiday meal.

It can be visiting the *shiva* home following the death of a family member of someone who let us down, sending them a letter of condolence, and offering help and support if needed.

It can be sitting across the table with those whose views differ from our own and *truly* giving them not only the *respect* they deserve, but perhaps even *empathizing* with their perspective. And to think what it would mean to be able to walk away from the table afterwards and together have a cup of coffee.

I wish I could say, “And *here* is what will happen when you perform *chesed*...”:

- We will be happier
- We will feel more fulfilled
- We will turn our enemies into our friends
- We will heal old wounds
- We will reignite relationships that fell by the wayside
- We will increase peace in the world

I wish I could say these things with certainty. I do believe in the possibility of these things, but I just don't know that there's a guarantee.

In fact *Mishnah* teaches that *chesed* is amongst the things *she'adam ochel peroteihem ba'olam hazeh v'bakeren kayemet lo l'olam habab*, amongst the things of which a person enjoys the fruit of in this world while the reward is in the world to come.⁵

⁵ *Mishnah Peah* 1:1

Chesed has the *potential* of making us feel good after we do it. But the reward of *chesed* may not be instant, it may not be evident until we reach the World to Come.

The World to Come is a phrase used to indicate a messianic era or a time after the arrival of the messiah. A time of repair. A time of peace.

But I think we can read The World to Come another way as well.

A couple of weeks ago I came across a story that went viral. A story that really made me furious.

The story was one of about Bo, an 11-year-old boy with Autism who ate lunch by himself every day in the school cafeteria. One day Travis Rudolph, a Florida State University football player came to the school and saw the boy eating alone and chose to eat lunch with him.

Yes, an act of chesed.

But an act of *chesed* in a place where, it seemed to me, there was no *chesed* to begin with.

Why was this child sitting by himself every day?

Why didn't anyone join him sooner?

But the follow-up of this story shows the potential outcome of *chesed*.

The children observed the football player doing this and the next week Bo was cheered on by classmates and other children invited him to eat with them.⁶

⁶ <http://time.com/4478169/boy-autism-football-player-fsu-travis-rudolph-lunch-alone/>

Instead of understanding the World to Come as a messianic age, let's understand it as the world that we create through our actions. *Chesed* might bring us, and those we offer it to, joy in the moment. But the real benefits of *chesed* come after we perform it.

Travis Rudolph spent one hour, a moment of time in his world, eating lunch with a child who sat alone. But the reward of this moment is that he set in motion a world where, *hopefully*, this boy won't ever again eat alone.

These are the actions on which the world is built. Actions which not only affect the individual with whom we act toward with *chesed*, but the lives of so many others thereafter.

Listen. *Chesed* is *not* a hot topic. It's not exciting. It's not even that profound. And while the acts of *chesed* can be simple, preparing ourselves to do them is like trying to convince ourselves to get out of bed early in the morning to work out after a late night—it's possible, but the extra sleep is so much more appealing.

Preparing ourselves to do *chesed* is really really *really* hard work.

That's why there are 612 *other mitzvot* that exist to help us get ready to do it.

It's not that profound. And yet, I stand up here tonight, believing with all of my heart that what we, what our synagogue, our community, towns, our state, our country (really, really, our country), and our world, need in this new year more than anything else is *chesed*.

So, yes, I am getting up here and simply saying, "Let's go out into the world and be excessively kind."

Our distance from *chesed* has caused many of us to edge closer and closer to becoming *kofer b'ikar*, people who deny the very building blocks of Judaism.

And the world is resting on a weak foundation because of it.

But, this year, 5777, has the potential to be a year of strengthening that foundation.

As we sing *Olam Chesed Yibaneh*, take the opportunity to reflect on how you are going to help (re)build the world through *chesed*.

Leave tonight with just one commitment of how you will act with *chesed*.

And tomorrow come up with another.

And the next day, another.

The world needs some serious rebuilding.

And it starts here.

With us.

Shanah Tovah.