

**Erev Rosh Hashanah
Sanctuary
2014**

There's a trend that has been spreading on Facebook recently, asking participants to list ten books that have influenced and stayed with them over the years. I've avoided answering, because that felt like a lot of work for a silly Facebook post.

But if I were to play the game, I'm sure I'd include Love Story, the Harry Potter series (which count as one book, by the way), the All of a Kind Family books, The Red Tent, and As a Driven Leaf. Of course, I don't think I could be a rabbi at KI if I didn't also include a book by Rabbi Heschel on that list - my favorite is "God in Search of Man".

Over the summer I came across a book that I just might have to add to the list: it's called, "What a Way to Start a New Year!" (*hold it up*). Perhaps you have read it; it is a PJ library book this year and I know many of our families received it in the mail. Allow me to tell you the story.

Dina is a young girl, the oldest of three children, whose family moves to a new town right before Rosh Hashanah. The plan had been to drive back to their hometown of Greenville for the holidays for one last dose of the familiar and comforting. But their trip back to Greenville on Rosh Hashanah was delayed by series of misfortunes: a dirty diaper, a forgotten special pillow, car keys locked in the house, and, ultimately, a flat tire.

With a broken car and a much-delayed start time, it's clear to the family that they're not going to make it to Greenville in time to be in their old shul for Rosh Hashanah. The kids - already disappointed to not be spending the holiday with their old friends and neighbors - are feeling dejected and out-of sorts.

Meanwhile, Dad calls his co-worker, Mr. Levine, who invites them to join him at his synagogue, Temple Shalom, for the holiday. "We'll eat when we get home," Mom said. "I have leftover pizza."

Which prompts Dina's younger brother, Harry, to ask, "No brisket? No honey cake?"

Even to a young child, it's obvious that pizza is no way to celebrate the Jewish New Year. Still, it's heartening that they are going to shul at all, given everything that's happened - right after a move, no less - when it would surely be easier to just give up and stay home.

So they go to services, in a new building with no familiar faces. But they quickly realize that the music and prayers sound the same - and that's comforting to them all, including the adults.

After services are over, Dad introduces the family to Mr. Levine, who is described as having white hair and a big smile.

And then comes my favorite page in the book (*read it from book*):

“I’d like you to meet my wife,” he said.

A white-haired woman held out her hand to Mom. “Do you have plans for dinner?” she asked.

Harry crossed his arms and pouted, “leftover pizza”

Mrs. Levine smiled. “Why don’t you come over to our house?”

“Are you having brisket?” Harry asked.

Mrs. Levine nodded.

“OKAY!” Harry said. Everybody laughed.

As one might expect, the story comes to a neat conclusion: the kids meet the Levines’ grandchildren, everyone eats brisket, and new traditions are started. As they say: happily ever after.

But it’s Mrs. Levine’s invitation that stuck with me more than anything. Does she typically plan for 5 additional people at every holiday meal, just in case? Did she do some quick math of how much food she had prepared, how many chairs were in the house, and how much room was at the table, before deciding to invite them? Or was it just automatic for her to see a family in need and recognize that she had the power to make a difference, with no expectation of being paid back?

In Mrs. Levine’s small, generous act, she welcomes a new family into her Jewish community, simultaneously making it theirs. Facing a situation that would have been overwhelming to even the most calm and organized of us, the family is given the opportunity to celebrate a holiday and to start making fond memories in their new home .

I am inspired by the ease with which Mrs. Levine issues the invitation. There are no whispered conversations with her spouse about whether or not they should extend the invitation; no check-in about the dynamics of adding a new, unknown family to their dinner. And seemingly no hesitation or doubt that this is the right thing to do.

What would life be like if we acted like Mrs. Levine more often? I don’t just mean inviting guests to our house for meals; rather, what would the world be like if we more frequently did the “right” thing, without worrying about the cost?

We all struggle with this at times. We often want to invite more people for dinner, because there’s great satisfaction in providing a communal and a Jewish connection, and a good meal to someone in need of all three. Yet instead of the positives, we all too often feel only the fear of not having enough food, squishing too many guests around the table, or being self-conscious about the meal we’ve planned. We are stopped by the fear of what might go wrong, instead of realizing the potential of what good we could do.

Dozens of other, similar situations play out and leave us wondering how we could have done better:

- We walk by someone begging on the street, convincing ourselves that it's better to give through an organization, or that if we only had a granola bar or an apple to share, instead of money, we'd have happily given it.
- We let a solo guest leave our house or a meeting without offering them a ride home or accompanying them to their destination because...there are dishes to be done, a next meeting to go to, sleep to be had, or work to be completed.
- We ignore someone's request for help, hoping that another person will step up and let us off the hook.

It's easy to forget that the person in front of us - the friend, the neighbor, even the stranger - is in need, and that we have the power to help them. It's easy to find convenient excuses to say "no," or to not even respond at all.

There's a Halachic principle, "ha'osek b'mitzvah patur mimitzvah." The traditional interpretation of this idea is that when you are engaged in one mitzvah, you are exempt from doing other mitzvot. A deeper interpretation is that when you are engaged in a mitzvah, all other obligations and worries fade away. That is, when you allow yourself to add another family to your dinner table, you become less concerned about only having enough food for one helping and not enough for seconds. It becomes easier to forget about the lack of elbow room and instead focus on the company present. When you give up your Sunday afternoon to help someone in need, your life is enriched by the mitzvah, not hindered by the time it took.

I believe that we are all good people. We mean well, we want to do right by ourselves and others, and, in most situations, we know the right thing to do. But the right thing to do isn't always easy - and sometimes we allow our hectic, crazy lives to be the excuse that prevents us from doing what we know we should.

My great-grandmother used to say: "Whatever you do on Rosh Hashana is what you will do during the rest of the year." For the next ten days, let us take the time to make this year one of generosity and caring. While we are feeling close to God and asking forgiveness from our friends and family, let us also take steps to live the life that we know we can. Stop putting up barriers; stop making excuses. Let's act on our best instincts and be ambassadors to those in need, whether they could use a meal, a walk home, or simply a friendly face. Lend a hand where it is needed to ease someone's burden; we've all been there and we know what a difference the help makes.

As we begin the Aseret Yamai Tshuvah, the ten holiest days of the year, let us live the lives that we want God to be judging this High Holy Day season - lives full of compassion, generosity, and gratitude.

Shana Tova.