

Chesed - a sermon by Rabbi Chaya Gusfield

Beth Chaim does an amazing job to support its mourners and ill members and we should be proud. Very proud. For many years I have been closely associated with many different synagogues. Beth Chaim's Caring Community serving the needs of our congregants as we go through crisis, mourning and illness truly goes beyond any I have experienced. As Kathy Bleier so beautifully described, organized by neighborhood and led by chesed coordinators, we care, and we respond. I know that it is within our reach to become an even better and even stronger Caring Community. How do we get there?

It is my hope, dream, and belief that everyone can feel the support and care of our community no matter what crisis or chronic stressful situation we are facing. This requires connecting with each other in ways we have not yet tried. I believe we can take Beth Chaim to the next level of connection, integrity and meaning.

I begin with a story:

Reb Zalman Schachter Shalomi, the founder of Jewish Renewal and one of our beloved teachers, tells a story of his meeting with the Slonimer rebbe, a Chassidic rebbe who lived in Jerusalem until the year 2000. The Slonimer is also known by his book the *Netivot Shalom* which means the paths of peace. Reb Zalman knew the Slonimer rebbe had the deepest of love in his heart for his Chassidim and was able to open the hearts of those in his presence. Reb Zalman came to him with an important question. *“What is it that you do that allows you to connect so deeply with God? How can I teach that attunement?”* The Slonimer Rebbe took his hand and placed it on his heart while he answered Reb Zalman's questions. Through this connection, Reb Zalman received a great blessing. The Slonimer Rebbe demonstrated through his loving response how

connecting with God takes place in part through connecting with another person on a soul level.

This reminds me of a profound story found in the Talmud.

R' Chiya bar Abba was ill. R' Yochanan went to visit him and asked him in so many words if he wanted to get better. R' Chiya said he no longer wanted to be ill. R' Yochanan said, "Give me your hand" and through their connection, R' Yochanan revived him. When R' Yochanan was ill, R' Chanina went to visit him and asked the same question and received the same answer. So R' Chanina said to him "Give me your hand" and he revived R' Yochanan. The Talmud asks the question, "If R' Yochanan had the power to revive R' Chiya, why didn't he have the power to revive himself?" The answer of course is "a captive cannot release himself from prison". He needs help.

When someone returns from the hospital or is ill, we offer each other our hand through meals, visits, shopping or sometimes even rides when needed. We give each other our hand so beautifully by praying for people every week during services.

We offer each other our hand at a funeral, shiva minyan or at services when someone is walking the mourning path. We send cards, make condolence calls, and bring food to the house. When the yartzheit of that person comes around in future years, we say their name aloud at Friday night services before we recite the Kaddish, bringing their memory into our community. We deserve to celebrate how we so beautifully give each other our hand in this community.

I know that for many people who have lost a loved one, the weeks, months or even years prior to their death were filled with worry, facing difficult decisions and a lot

of physical, emotional, and spiritual work. During this time we need to make sure they also receive our hand.

I know people in the midst of a very difficult divorce where it feels as if their friends and community have taken sides and they find it almost impossible to stay connected to their support systems. They need our hand.

I have a friend who is facing fertility issues that occupy her heart and mind on a daily basis, but she doesn't feel that she can speak openly about it. She needs our hand.

I received a call from a family who is consumed with worry because their child is in serious trouble with the law and is involved with self-destructive behavior. They need our hand.

We all know people who have lost their jobs and are in financial crisis. They need our hand.

I have a friend who is filled with anxiety while supporting his father whose Alzheimer's causes him to be irrational and agitated. My friend is working, raising a family, and trying to help his father find some peace. He needs our hand.

Many of us here are dealing with more than one or two very stressful situations at the same time and our suffering is complex, often making it even more difficult to reach out for support.

One of the reasons we may have overlooked some of these needs is that when we have chronic stress, asking for help can be difficult because we feel so overwhelmed by our situation and don't even know what we need. **THIS IS WORTH REPEATING**
Asking for help can be difficult when we feel so overwhelmed by our situation and don't even know what we need.

If we are blessed to be on the community's radar, it is probably due to the grace of some angel who noticed our situation and responded. In many situations, however, receiving the wonderful meals or practical help that our Caring Community provides when we become aware of a need, may not be what is needed. We still need, however, to feel seen, and to know that people are thinking of us. There are ways we can help people feel supported and not alone that don't require a lot of time or work. Let me explain.

The Slonimer Rebbe teaches that through attaching ourselves to one another, we are considered as one person and guarded by God. He says, if one person is in a difficult place and can't pray themselves, or is having any other deficiency keeping them from feeling whole and connected to their truest self, when they attach their heart to someone in the community who can pray, two things happen. One, the entire community is raised up or made stronger, and two, the person in need can make a connection to God through his or her friend's connection to God.

By letting people who are in need know we are praying for them, or holding them in our hearts, their pain, anxiety, overwhelm, stress, trauma, or chaos, can soften, and perhaps they can handle what might have felt unmanageable to them in the past.

At the beginning of our annual rabbinical conferences, we select a name of one of our colleagues from a basket. Our responsibility is to pray for that person, whether we know them personally or not, every day during our conference. There are no other instructions. How, when, how often, is completely open ended. During one conference I had been struggling with a migraine all weekend and felt very alone and depleted even though I was on the Program Committee and very excited about the conference. I woke up one morning in terrible pain, and suddenly realized, NO one had been praying for me!

The power of prayer is so strong, I knew I wasn't being held in prayer. I marched down to the registration table and discovered some names hadn't been picked out of the basket. My name was among them. Once we remedied that situation, I wasn't cured. But I didn't feel so alone anymore, and it gave me some peace and strength to be able to make it through the rest of the conference.

Every single one of us is able to send positive thoughts and feelings to someone in need. **I challenge each of us to join our synagogue's efforts to hold each other in prayer during our times of need, whether they be acute or long-term needs.**

I want to speak to those of you who are thinking: "I'm uncomfortable doing this. I don't have the time. I'm not qualified to pray for someone else." We can learn from Rebbe Nachman about this. On Rebbe Nachman's last Rosh Hashanah, his 4 year old grandson, Yisrael was with him. The Rebbe was in a very serious condition, and said to his grandson. "Yisrael, pray to God that I should get better" The little boy said "God! God! Let my Zeide be well!" The other people in the room smiled, but the Rebbe said, "This is exactly how we have to ask things of God. What other way is there to pray to God?" The essence of prayer is total simplicity: to speak to God like a child talking to his father or mother, or the way a person talks with a friend." Rebbe Nachman shows us that we do not need any special training to pray for someone.

The Baal Shem Tov says we must **praise** someone as part of **praying for them.**

When we see them in a positive light, we transform our consciousness into a more loving environment which stimulates the divine flow of love. Think about the person, praise them, and send them love. And it doesn't hurt to get specific about what you would like for them. **If there is ONE thing you get from this sermon, I hope it is that we are all**

qualified to hold someone in our hearts and connect with them. Through our intention, we can ease someone's stress and offer them a little peace.

This is one way we can support people with chronic or hidden needs as well as those mourning and acutely ill.

In addition to our prayers and love, people dealing with challenges that seem insurmountable to them, also need us to be assertive and specific when we offer our support. Sometimes we need to help them identify their needs because they can't do it themselves. When a friend of mine's father died, his close friend who did not live locally, started to say, "how can I help" and stopped himself. Without waiting for a specific request, he instead said, "I am going to call you every day and check in with you, is that ok?" He offered something specific, and he asked permission. It was exactly what my friend needed.

In today's Torah portion, we read that God hears the cry of Yishma'el in the desert, hungry and parched, waiting to die. God responds by showing his mother Hagar where the well of water is. We learn how important, even when difficult, it is to cry out when we are hurting. If you are a person who is in need, I challenge you to let your situation be known and ask for help, even if you don't know exactly what you need. I want to encourage everyone who hears the cry of someone in our community, to ask that person if we can add their name to our misheberach list. Also, please pick up the phone and tell one of the rabbis that you heard the cry. Don't assume we know.

I offer this misheberach for all those in need of healing of body, mind, or spirit.

This healing blessing was written by Lisa Beth Kaplan, from Monterey, who died last year of cancer. She wrote this beautiful healing prayer before she received her cancer diagnosis. May her memory be a blessing. Zichrona livracha.

Misheberach avoteinu v imoteinu
Hu y'varech v'rapeh et hacholim

Grant the ones, fighting illness, time without the pain
Help the ones, in despair, know some joy again

Misheberach avoteinu v imoteinu
Hu y'varech v'rapeh et hacholim

Bless me too, that I may be, a source of strength, for those in need
When I fall, help me hear, the prayer of healing
Someone is singing, just for me

Misheberach avoteinu v imoteinu
May we all be blessed, with hope and health and love

Throughout the year, we will be holding healing gatherings to engage in this simple practice of praying for others who want to be held in prayer. We will develop a core group of people interested in serving the community by praying for specific individuals every day. If you are interested in being prayed for or being held in positive thoughts, or being part of the group that is focusing their prayers on others, please let us know. You do not necessarily need to attend the gatherings to participate.

If you are someone in need, you may find that by attending the gatherings, you not only receive great gifts, but by allowing others to pray for you, they too, receive gifts and are lifted closer to God. By being part of this gathering you may find that praying for others helps you, too. The line between those giving and receiving may melt away. In 5770 and in years to come, may we all feel touched by the hands of our community.

May we all know the gift of being someone who gives and receives.