

# SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

VAYERA

NOVEMBER 3, 2012

18 HESHVAN 5773

**DEDICATIONS: Mazal Tov to Ilana and Jordan Pilevsky on the birth of a baby boy!  
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Daily Minyan Mon – Thurs at 979  
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212-289-2100. Sam, Michael and  
Hymie Cohen ... we'll need you  
next week.

## EDITORS NOTES

I have heard it quoted that the  
Baal Shem Tov taught that when  
a piece of straw falls from a  
wagon loaded with straw, this has  
been decreed by Heaven.  
Similarly, when a leaf falls from a  
tree, it is because Heaven has  
decreed that this particular leaf at  
this particular moment would fall  
at this particular spot. Once the  
Baal Shem Tov showed his  
disciples a certain leaf as it fell to  
the ground and told them to pick it  
up. They did so and saw that a  
worm was underneath it. The  
Baal Shem Tov explained that the  
worm had been suffering due to  
the heat, so this leaf had fallen to  
give it shade. (Shaar HaOtiyot –  
Hashgacha Peratit)

So what does it mean when entire  
trees each with thousands of  
leaves are blowing around?

As we sit here, so much of the  
New York Metropolitan area  
community has been devastated.  
So many friends have had their  
homes flooded, their cars  
permanently disabled after sitting

under sea water or worse floating  
away. The flood led to one  
friend's home along with his three  
cars to go on fire and blow up.  
Trees have fallen everywhere,  
onto homes and cars. Anywhere  
near the coast, the ocean water  
dragging sand and seaweed and  
the bay waters found their way  
into anything and everything (like  
my lower level). And it wasn't the  
rain! We had less than half an  
inch of rain over a couple of days.  
How do you have a flood with no  
rain?

And why?

Lower Manhattan was completely  
flooded. Much of the Jersey shore  
washed away. The Five Towns  
are still under water. Brooklyn and  
Queens look like obstacle  
courses with fallen trees  
everywhere. Long Beach washed  
out, under a curfew, with access  
limited and under the watchful  
eye of National Guard protecting  
from looters. It looks like a war  
zone. I passed by a Marshals  
store and a Conway store with my  
son. Both had their glass broken  
and both were stripped from  
merchandise as locusts strip a  
field. We saw boats resting on  
lots, blocks away from their docks  
while houses have left their lots  
and can be seen floating in the  
sea. So much was beyond  
anything we would have  
imagined.

And who did all of this affect? My  
friend Ezra just called to see how  
we fared. I asked him to consider  
that all of this happened in an  
area where there are more Jews  
living within this small 50 mile  
radius than in anyplace else in  
the world other than Israel. There

must be a message, a message  
from on High to us. But the tricky  
part is figuring out that message.

I received altogether 26 separate  
reasons from I guess 26 prophets  
who believe they know why G-d  
does what he does. I'm going to  
send them all back to Moses so  
that they explain their trick to him,  
because even Moses couldn't  
understand everything. And not  
one of them listed global warming  
.... I guess not too many  
ecologically minded people write  
me.

One I found amusing was that  
Noah who has only one portion  
was getting jealous of Abraham  
who has three. Interesting too is  
that this flood takes place in the  
month of Cheshvan when the  
Rabbis teach us that Noah's flood  
began. And if you saw the  
incredible rainbows, how can you  
not be reminded of G-d's  
promise? At least we survived.  
We just lost property. We get to  
rebuild. Noah's generation can't  
say the same. Wake up call! You  
have another chance!

Others said that we are guilty of  
the same sins as those that  
caused the flood. We too are  
guilty of immorality in all its forms,  
idolatry in the practice of  
worshiping the almighty dollar or  
ourselves, and theft, from the  
petty to the Madoffs. But I found  
that one too obvious. Maybe  
because it makes the most sense,  
so time for some self-  
examination. When we get such  
a wallop, then it's time for each of  
us to stop, examine and fix.

There were the jokes like G-d  
sneezed too hard, but this isn't

the time for jokes. The orthodox blamed it on the reform, the ultra-orthodox blamed it on the modern orthodox, the poor blamed it on the rich. Oddly enough, no one blamed it on themselves. It seems that its never me that's the cause, it always the other guy!

I found those saying it related to Hashem pushing the election one way or the other more amusing. Most were saying that it was G-d's way of pushing Romney to victory. Then I wondered, if that were really true, then was it just an act that Chris Christie spent the last two days praising his new best friend, Mr. Obama? Does the Romney camp have a plan that Mr. Romney will campaign in Ohio and Florida while Mr. Obama stays busy in the Garden State with everyone's favorite foul mouthed governor? And if G-d really wanted to end the election quickly in favor of our new favorite Mormon, couldn't G-d more easily just come up with a Kenyan Birth certificate? Even if its forged, if G-d prints it, who would know? And if not a birth certificate, then why not create some simple scandal to hold the headlines rather than a hurricane? If it's only about an election, why make so many of us homeless or at least without power and water for a week or more? They sent me an answer for that too! Hester Panim – G-d was hiding in face and setting the puppets in motion from behind the curtain. The self-righteous have an answer for everything.

A rainless hurricane? When I spoke with my friend Serge, he said it reminded him of the splitting of the sea but in reverse. There the verses describe a big wind that blew all night that forced the water to separate. Here that same wind blew the water towards us. And where March/April represents the spring equinox, it's September/October that represents the opposite. If

you think about the fact that all this water came from wind, its mind boggling. What's the message?

It's the economy stupid. Yes G-d did this so that we would suffer 100 billion dollars or so in losses and have the Federal government borrow some more money from the Chinese, funneling it into the economy, increasing the GDP by .2%, yes there is a point before the 2, and thereby spurring economic activity in the northeast. So all our suffering is really a gift!

So as you can see, I haven't been prophetically inspired tonight as to why it happened, but maybe I can Biblically inspire you in what you can do about it. .

The lesson of this week's portion is the lesson of hospitality and the lesson of helping each other. As you will recall, as we begin the verses, we find Abraham sitting outside his tent in the heat of the day. He is recovering from his circumcision and three Bedouin looking men appear. He runs to greet them. He gives them water and food, inviting them to be his guests. This episode is the paradigm of the commandment for us to host guests.

Rabbi Frand quotes The Berditchever Rebbe who comments: The first rule of how to treat guests is to make them feel comfortable and not make them feel as though they are inferior. Even though, in truth, the host may be much superior to them, he should never show that off. The guests should never be made to feel "This host of ours is in a different league than we are."

He continues, If you have a guest for Shabbat who is mainly preoccupied with trivialities in life, he is not a "Daf Yomi person" or anything near that, do not say to him, "Well, it is already 9 o'clock. I

have to learn my Daf Yomi." It will make him feel inferior. If you are one (who recites special prayers at midnight mourning the destruction of the Temple and your guest says at 9:30 pm "I am going up to bed now", do not tell him "Oh, I can't go to bed yet, I need to stay up another 2 and a half hours to recite Tikun Chatzot". If your guest asks you, "What time is minyan in the morning?" do not tell him "I never miss praying at sunrise," when you know your guest has never seen sunrise! This is rule #1 of hospitality – do not make your guest feel inferior.

Last week I mentioned that Noah was saved because he did chesed – kindness with animals. Abraham realized if kindness with animals can save Noah, then how much more so is kindness to people valued. The flood gave Noah an opportunity.

Well this flood gives you an opportunity. So many people called me during the last few days. They saw the devastation around our house on every news report. They heard that things were difficult and asked how they could help. They asked if we wanted to move in to stay with them. They insisted that they were there for us if we needed anything.

I know of many families without power themselves who opened their doors to neighbors whose houses are uninhabitable because of damage. The family of a friend of my daughter who had the foresight to install a backup generator has dozens of extension cords leading from their home to homes up and down the block. The neighbor who has his kids going door to door to see if they can charge peoples cell phones use the small generator they have. The man with the SUV

and a tank full of gas doing grocery runs for all his neighbors.

I was so moved when Rabbi Benjamin Rubin, a renowned surgeon who moonlights as the spiritual leader of Magen David Sephardic Congregation-Beit Eliahu, in Rockville Maryland sent a note asking, "Is there any way our community can help yours? Without power and heat Shabbat will be very difficult for your community. We have a large Marriott hotel next to our synagogue. We can make arrangements for meals in the shul, and discount rates at the hotel." I met Rabbi Rubin once for a minute or two and yet he sought me out when he heard about our troubles.

There are thousands of families who are looking at a Shabbat in homes without gas, electric or water, whose cars are out of commission, whose lives are a bit scary now. Everything that was in the refrigerator and freezer is now garbage. Food may be running low. Stocked supermarkets may be inaccessible to them. Reach out to them whether they are a distant relative or a friend of a friend. Some are alone and filled with tremendous anxiety over how they can rebuild. Take them in for a couple of days. Offer them a bed, a meal, a Shabbat which they can enjoy and remember. Pack up some groceries and deliver it. See if they need you to do any errands for them. Feel their pain and help alleviate. Show them they are not alone and that you care. I am sure you can all find one family out there with very little effort whose lives you can have an impact on in this time of need. You can't imagine how helpful human interaction can be to people whose stress levels are skyrocketing. As I type this, I stopped to take two phone calls. Two people, both in tears, one luckily moved out to a relative

with power, the other still home alone. They are so afraid because aside from their homes, they lost their cars and can't get to work and have no idea how they'll pay their bills.

If you can't help personally, send me a check or just email me that you'll send me a check or make a credit card donation and we'll use that money now to directly help people in desperate need and living with so many unstated fears. And if you have a car you were thinking of getting rid of, let us know. We have people in desperate need.

Why did G-d send Sandy to mess with our lives? Each of us should ask that question and try to search for our own answers. Where can we improve?

But at the same time, we have a challenge. G-d has placed it in our laps. We must remember that our father Abraham went out of his way for three strangers. He fed them and gave them shelter and he made them comfortable. Can't all of us do the same, not just for strangers, but for our own neighbors and brothers?

Shabbat Shalom

David Bibi

If you put the newsletter down without at least committing to do something for someone, then stop! Think! Make a commitment and do it! There should be no house with utilities that is not occupied this weekend and possibly next week by at least two families. See the article below by Rabbi Sacks on volunteering.

PS .... Phyllis Wagner from my Synagogue told me an amazing story. It's a feel good story and I was able to locate it. And attach it. From the New York Time by Margalit Fox

Dr. Peter Praeger, a heart surgeon who saved a man's life and as a result wound up owning a gefilte fish company — and who as a result of that wound up starting a successful natural-foods company — died on Sept. 22 in Hackensack, N.J.

At his death, Dr. Praeger was a co-chief of cardiothoracic surgery at Hackensack University Medical Center. He was also president and chief executive of Dr. Praeger's Sensible Foods, a maker of frozen natural foods, including veggie burgers and meatless chicken, sold in supermarkets and health-food stores in the United States and abroad.

Though the story of Dr. Praeger's company — born of two rabbinical prognostications, any number of hairpin turns of fate and the transformative realization that man cannot live by gefilte fish alone — reads like something out of Sholem Aleichem, it began, no less, on a Christmas Eve.

The time was the late 1980s, and Dr. Praeger was then on the staff of Westchester County Medical Center in Valhalla, N.Y. That December night, he was called in with his colleague, Dr. Eric Somberg, to perform emergency surgery. The patient, who had been hit by a drunken driver, had a ruptured aorta, and his life was at risk.

Through the surgeons' efforts the man's life was saved, although he was left unable to move his arms and legs. The patient's brother-in-law, Rubin Ungar, told Dr. Praeger that the family rabbi predicted he would regain the use

of his limbs. As a man of science, Dr. Praeger discounted the idea, as did the neurologist he consulted.

The patient regained the use of his limbs.

Several years went by. Then one day in the early 1990s, Dr. Praeger received a call from Mr. Ungar, whom he had befriended in the course of treating his brother-in-law.

The patient was fine, but Mr. Ungar's gefilte fish company was in trouble. The family rabbi had made another prediction: Any surgeon smart enough to save his congregant's life would be smart enough to save his congregant's brother-in-law's gefilte fish company.

Dr. Praeger demurred: he was, after all, a surgeon, not a fish maven. Mr. Ungar persisted.

What was more, Dr. Praeger did not like gefilte fish, the pale, perennial Ashkenazi appetizer made from poached ground fish.

But who, in the end, can fly in the face of rabbinical foreordination?

"It was like 'The Godfather,' " Dr. Praeger told the magazine New Jersey Monthly in 2007. "They pulled me into it."

Peter Ivan Praeger was born in Budapest on Sept. 20, 1947. After the Hungarian uprising of 1956, his family left for the United States, settling first in Newark and then in Queens. His father worked as a baker and later opened a men's clothing store in Harlem.

Peter Praeger earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Bridgeport and an M.D. from New York Medical College. At Hackensack, his responsibilities included

implanting left ventricular assist devices, used to aid patients whose hearts are failing.

In the early '90s, Drs. Praeger and Somberg became partners in Ungar's Gefilte Fish. They soon realized that the company's raison d'être was also its undoing.

"Unfortunately," Dr. Praeger told the industry magazine Food and Drink in 2010, "the only product he was making at that time was gefilte fish."

In 1994, the two doctors bought the company and gradually developed a line of meatless frozen foods. All are kosher, made from natural ingredients and low in cholesterol and saturated fat.

Today, Dr. Praeger's Sensible Foods, based in Elmwood Park, N.J., is a multimillion-dollar concern, selling its wares throughout the United States — retail outlets include Trader Joe's, Whole Foods and Zabar's — as well as in Canada, South America and Israel. Its product line includes falafel, Tex-Mex veggie burgers and sweet potato pancakes. It also includes gefilte fish, which Dr. Praeger came to love.

### Summary of The Weekly Torah Reading:

1st Aliya: The three angels appear to Avraham and foretell the birth of Yitzchak. Upon hearing the news, Sarah laughs to herself.

2nd Aliya: The angels depart to destroy Sodom, and Hashem [G-d] tells Avraham about His plans for destroying Sodom. Pasuk 18:18-19 proclaims G-d's confidence in Avraham to teach the world the concept of justice. Avraham negotiates,

unsuccessfully, on behalf of Sodom.

3rd Aliya: The story of the destruction of Sodom is told. Lot's generosity to the "two visitors" is rewarded and he, his wife, and only two of their children are saved from Sodom.

4th Aliya: Lot's wife looks back upon the destruction of Sodom and dies, and Lot and his two daughters escape into the mountains. Lot's daughters conspire to rebuild humankind, and taking advantage of Lot's drunkenness, they become pregnant from Lot resulting in the birth of Ammon and Moav. Avraham encounters Abimelech after which Sarah gives birth to Yitzchak in the year 2048.

5th Aliya: Yishmael and Hagar are forced out of Avraham's home, and an angel reassures Hagar of Yishmael's destiny.

6th Aliya: Abimelech and his general Phichol resolve their conflict with Avraham over water rights, and they "sign" a covenant of peace.

7th Aliya: In the year 2085, when Avraham was 137 and Yitzchak was 37, Avraham is commanded to sacrifice Yitzchak. This amazing story heralds the end of Avraham and Sarah's era, and the beginning of Yitzchak and Rivkah's era.

### EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

**"Hashem appeared to him...while he was sitting at the entrance of the tent." (Beresheet 18:1)**

After Abraham Abinu performs milah on himself, he sits at the opening of the tent to find guests. When guests arrive he runs, despite his bleeding wounds, to serve them an

enormous meal. All of this was Abraham's own inventions, in accordance with his system of emulating the Creator. But, wasn't this a little extreme? What would have been so terrible if Abraham took some time to allow himself to heal? This question only comes up when one doesn't understand the importance of hesed, doing acts of kindness.

In his book about hesed, the Hafess Hayim puts the subject in the proper perspective. One who needs a certain daily dose of medicine to stay alive does not leave the dosage to chance. It's too important. He does whatever is necessary to remember the medication and to keep a strict account of it. He can't have a situation in which at the end of the day he must wrack his brain to remember whether he took today's dose.

Hesed is the soul's life-sustaining medicine, yet the dosage is often left to chance.

On some days opportunities to help come and are seized. On some days opportunities are bypassed, and on some days no one asks for help. The Hafess Hayim sees this as a dangerously haphazard system for conducting one's life. It's comparable to a diabetic saying, "Some days I take my insulin. Some days I remember it but I don't bother with it. And then, some days I just don't feel I need it."

Hesed is too important to one's life in this world and the next to be handled in such a manner. The Hafess Hayim therefore urges each person to pursue hesed on a consistent daily basis. It doesn't have to be something big, even simple favors count. To give a compliment, to lend someone the use of his cell phone, buying a raffle to support a local institution, to give some advice.

Abraham Abinu's actions now don't seem so extreme. He fully realized more than any man how important hesed was and couldn't imagine a day without it, even if he needed those days to heal. Let us all begin this program of daily hesed.

**Whenever we study the story of Abraham and his beautiful deeds, we can't help but be amazed at the contrast between him and his nephew, Lot.**

Although Lot was his faithful student at the outset, as time went on he went his own way and ultimately landed in Sodom. We see a contrast between Sarah and Lot's wife in this perashah. Lot's wife, on the way escaping from the burning fires of Sodom, turned around to see what was happening behind her. She turned into a pillar of salt. Rashi tells us that she was stingy with her guests and wouldn't even give them salt for their food, so she was punished with becoming a pillar of salt. We see how much the influence of Sodom affected her. She, who saw her husband's uncle exhibit phenomenal hospitality, learned from her evil neighbors and became selfish and stingy.

In contrast to her, Sarah was very sensitive not to learn from evil influences. When she saw Yishmael behaving negatively, she told Abraham to send him away, because she didn't want Yitzhak to learn from Yishmael. We see the outcome of Sarah's wisdom, that Yitzhak became a sadik and Yishmael became the head of the Arabs! We must be so vigilant not to let evil influences penetrate our home and families! Not only must we be aware of our children's friends and check them out carefully, we must also combat the influence of the media in our homes. We must monitor what TV (if any) is allowed in the

house, and be especially vigilant with videos and Internet. We are the ones carrying on the legacy of Abraham and Sarah, and we must take our mission very seriously!

### **"CHANGING DIAPERS"**

Entering a new business relationship shares a common pitfall with beginning married life. Every new undertaking has potential positive and negative issues, and requires a certain amount of give-and-take to make it work. But people sometimes don't anticipate the contributions that will be needed on their part in order to make the "deal" work at the end of the day.

We must sometimes do tasks that we find unpleasant. I once overheard a proud father boast, "I don't change diapers!" He is probably the one who doesn't help clear the dishes off the table or take out the garbage, either. This selfish attitude overflows into all areas of personal and professional life.

In order to really succeed, you must be prepared to take the good with the bad. When your partner needs your help in doing one of those unpleasant things that you don't like to do, remember, you have committed to make the "marriage" work. That means that sometimes you have to change a diaper or run an unpleasant errand. It's the spirit of co-operation that will help you and your partner build a successful "business" – together! (One Minute With Yourself – Rabbi Raymond Beyda)

**RABBI ELI MANSOUR**  
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**Breaking Our Nature**

We read in Parashat Vayera the famous story known as "Akedat Yishak," where G-d commanded Abraham Abinu to offer his son, Yishak, as a sacrifice. This story begins by telling us that G-d "tested Abraham," to see the extent of his devotion to Hashem's commands. Just as Abraham drew the sword to sacrifice his son, an angel appeared to Abraham and told him not to proceed with the slaughter, as this was merely a test.

The question arises as to why this command was a test for Abraham Abinu, but not for Yishak. According to tradition, Yishak was 37 years old at the time of Akedat Yishak. He was not a young boy forced into this by his father. Wasn't this a test for him, as well? Why is Akedat Yishak presented as a test for Abraham, but not for Yishak?

One explanation is that this was a test specifically for Abraham because he had arrived at the belief in G-d on his own through logical reasoning. In a world that believed in idols, Abraham, in his profound wisdom and intelligence, recognized through logic that there must be a single Creator. Abraham's great test was fulfilling G-d's command that seemed wholly illogical. G-d had earlier promised to produce a great nation from Yishak, and now he tells him to kill him. This obviously defied all logic, and thus naturally challenged Abraham's entire approach, of arriving at belief through logic. His obedience to the divine command demonstrated that he was committed to G-d not only when

logic dictated following His laws, but even when His laws seem illogical.

But there is also another reason why this test was unique to Abraham. The Vilna Gaon taught that a person's task in this world is to overcome his innate negative tendencies. We are to identify our areas of personal weakness and work toward improving ourselves in those very areas. Thus, for example, a person who is naturally a glutton and enjoys overindulging in food should focus the bulk of his attention on moderating his food intake. A person who is by nature short-tempered has the responsibility of fighting against this tendency and being patient and tolerant of other people. We are not here to just accept our nature, to resign ourselves to the character flaws with which we are created. Rather, our main job during our lifetime is to break our nature, to perfect the flawed areas of our personalities.

Abraham, as we know, was naturally kind and generous. His outstanding quality was Hesed, as expressed by his hospitality, and in his impassioned plea on behalf of the wicked city of Sedom. He naturally loved and cared for all people. The test of Akedat Yishak required Abraham to go against that natural instinct in the most extreme way possible. There is nothing more cruel and heartless than killing one's own son. The command o Akedat Yishak was necessary for Abraham to show that he was prepared to obey G-d's commands even when they directly opposed his most basic natural instincts. And thus the Midrash comments that if Abraham had not passed this test, the tenth and final test to which G-d subjected him, all the previous nine tests would not have counted. This test was

necessary to show that he was devoted to G-d no matter what this entailed, no matter how strongly he was naturally disinclined to obey His command.

This insight into the Akeda is relevant to many different areas of life. We have a natural tendency not to admit to making a mistake, to always insisting that we are correct. In marriage, especially, this natural instinct must be broken. Marriage requires us to hear another perspective and admit when it is more correct than ours, something which is very difficult to do because it goes against one of our most basic, natural tendencies. We also have a natural tendency during periods of stress and anxiety to blurt out hurtful and damaging remarks. This tendency, too, must be broken for our marriage and other relationships to succeed.

The story of Akedat Yishak teaches us that we can and must break natural negative tendencies. There is no such thing as "It's too hard, this is just the way I am." If this is the way we are, then our job is precisely to change that very nature. If a man as kind as Abraham could obey God's command to slaughter his son, then certainly we can break our natural instincts toward anger, obstinacy, and so on. To the contrary, this is precisely why we are here – to correct those natural tendencies, to improve the flawed areas of our characters, to continuously work towards rising closer to perfection.

### Rabbi Wein

Godliness is a matter of perception – the perception of the individual himself or herself, as well as the perception of the outside society. Avraham is recognized, even by his pagan peers, as being a person of Godliness in their midst. A Godly person is recognizable to others through behavior, speech, and interpersonal relationships. That is what Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin of Salant meant in his famous statement: "The other person's welfare in this world is the key to my welfare in the eternal world."

The rabbis of the Talmud always emphasized the importance of one's reputation amongst others in his society. "What do the other human beings say about him?" was always their test of resident Godliness in an individual. Avraham has an open hand and an open heart, a concern for others - even those who are his spiritual enemies and are wrongdoers.

Avraham, however, is not a pacifist nor is he weak and naïve in the face of evil. He goes to war to save Lot and outwits both Pharaoh and Avimelech in their nefarious behavior toward his wife, Sarah. He is the perfect example and role model for the necessary practicality and realism of life, coupled with the Godly compassion for other human beings and their physical and spiritual plights.

In Judaism, service of God is always inextricably bound to the service of human society. As has often been pointed out, this was the central point of Avraham's faith, something that apparently was found lacking in his otherwise righteous predecessor, Noah.

A Godly person has super-sensitive faculties. Avraham

hears the heavenly message to leave his homeland and to journey and settle in the Land of Israel. The great Rabbi of Kotzk observed that God's directive was made to all publicly but only Avraham heard it and acted upon it.

His Godliness in the attitude he exhibited towards others, his self-sacrifice in defense of his Godly convictions, his opposition to paganism and its societal and moral ills, and his acts of kindness and devotion to the help others, all combined to give him the ability to hear what others were deaf to and to see what others were blind to.

He is able to "see" God appear before him and to conduct a conversation, so to speak, with his Creator. That is the reward for and the measure of true Godliness in a person. His Godly personality and home environment transforms the three Bedouin Arabs who enter his tent into angels. Godliness can be contagious just as evil is also contagious. ,

Godliness sees the Creator in every activity and occurrence in one's life and society. It therefore prevents pettiness, selfishness and self-aggrandizement from dominating our behavior, speech and attitudes. King David in Psalms proclaimed: "I have placed God before my eyes permanently!" By so doing he captured in a phrase the essence of Godliness and Jewish life. A society that does not strive for at least a modicum of Godliness in its private lives and public environment will be afflicted with ears that hear not and eyes that see not. Hopefully, not so the people of Israel, Avraham's children and heirs.

### Sir Jonathan Sacks Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth

#### **The Jewish community could not exist for a day without its volunteers**

Among the memories I cherish of an unforgettable Olympic summer was the way 70,000 volunteers transformed the mood of London, turning it for a while into a more gracious place. Helpful, courteous, smiling, they seemed to symbolise the better angels of our nature. Members of my local synagogue who volunteered told me what a privilege they felt it to be, even though it involved long hours and meant missing the Games themselves. It was a reminder of a truth we sometimes forget, that the greatest untapped source of renewable energy is altruism. People want to give.

Volunteering has been undervalued in Britain for a long time. Often it has been seen as a kind of cut-price, amateur version of work that would be better done by the State. When politicians speak about it, people hear in the background the sound of budgets being cut. But voluntary work is actually something else altogether. It is an expression of shared responsibility for common good. It is personal engagement in pursuit of an ideal. It is active citizenship of the highest order. It softens the contours of random fate. It tells us that not all compassion can be paid for by taxes and outsourced to government agencies. A society in which there are high levels of voluntary activity will simply be a better, happier place than one where there are not. Ask any volunteer and they will usually tell you that they gain more than they give. They don't do it for recognition. They do it because they know volunteering helps

change the world because it changes us.

Jews know this in their bones. Our community could not exist for a day without its volunteers. They are the lifeblood of our organisations, whether they involve welfare, youth, education, care of the sick and elderly, or even protection against violence and abuse. It's a tradition going back twenty-six centuries to the Babylonian exile when, for the first time after achieving statehood, Jews found themselves without a land or home of their own. They were without rights or power. They knew that if they were to maintain a communal infrastructure, they would have to do it for themselves. So began a tradition of voluntary collective responsibility that sustained Jews through centuries of exile and dispersion during which, always and everywhere, they were a minority, usually vulnerable and often desperately poor.

In medieval Europe wherever you found a community of Jews you would also find a dense network of chevrot, "fellowships," for every conceivable purpose: food and clothing for the poor, dowries for poor brides, medical attention for the sick, burial of the dead, support for the bereaved, assistance for the unemployed or incapacitated, and a system of education – schools and adult classes – unrivalled elsewhere. It was driven by the twin principles laid down by the pre-Christian sage Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I?" It was, in essence, a voluntary welfare state, and it gave rise to habits of the heart that still mark Jewish communities today.

No less significant than the Jewish experience is what happened in Britain and America

in the nineteenth century. These were societies undergoing profound transformation. It was the age of industrialisation, in which people were moving from countryside to town, villages to cities, living and working in cramped, insanitary conditions. The results were there for anyone to see: disrupted communities, dysfunctional families, neglected and abandoned children, alcoholism, domestic abuse and street violence, the world of Dickens' novels that troubled the consciences of social reformers.

The response in both countries was extraordinary: an unprecedented proliferation of charities, voluntary associations and friendly societies, focussing on neglected groups in society: children, widows, the poor, the sick and the uneducated. Charities could be found establishing schools, hospitals, almshouses, orphanages, shelters for the homeless and "settlements" like Toynbee Hall in deprived urban areas. The effect was to strengthen civil society and humanize fate at a time when the benefits of economic growth were unevenly distributed. Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in the 1830s, rightly saw volunteering – he called it "the art of association" – as an essential part of "the apprenticeship of liberty." Too much dependence on the state, he believed, would undermine the health of democratic freedom.

We are going to need something similar in the twenty-first century as our social needs outrun our ability to pay for them through taxation. But the case for volunteering is only secondarily economic and political. Fundamentally it is moral and ethical. Strong states need strong societies, and the difference between them is that the State uses legislation and coercion; society uses altruism and

empathy. The first supplies needs; the second changes lives. Whether our slogan is "the big society" or "one nation," we will only get there by getting up and taking part. Giving is what makes a nation great.

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