

In Tzedakah, I Behold the Face of God
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple
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I have very fond memories of going to Temple when I was young. My parents used to take me every single Friday night for Shabbat from the time I was 4 up through High School (We might have missed the occasional Friday night here or there when I got older). We went for various reasons, and to be honest, I'm not sure how high up on that list was the service itself. I have very clear memories of those Shabbat evenings. When I was 4 or 5 I used to make my parents sit up in the first row (which, now that I think about it, was probably the first sign that I was headed towards the rabbinate). I would sit there with my parents and my best friends, Elliot, Aaron, and Eleanor, and we used to read books or play with the red tassels that were in the Gates of Prayer, or play rock paper scissors or that sort of thing and every now and then my parents would try and quiet us and my Rabbi, Rick Jacobs, would stop her and say something to the effect of, "We are here to celebrate the joy of life and living and that's what they're doing, so let them be." At the *oneg* we used to see who could hold the Kiddush cup higher and with every other growth spurt there would be another winner and after that we used to go up into the religious school hallway and play freeze tag. For the life of me I couldn't remember a single sermon, but I still remember the tune we used to sing L'cha Dodi to and every now and then the rabbi would say something that would stick with me forever.

My first years of being a synagogue member were filled with excitement, discovery, and mystery. One aspect of synagogue life that carried a lot of mystique for me was our homeless shelter. The Brooklyn Heights Synagogue has been running their own women's homeless shelter for four nights a week from November through March for the last 30 years and they are celebrating their 30th anniversary this Friday night. My father was a consistent volunteer sleeping at the synagogue many nights a year and as I became older I started doing it with him. During our first year as members I remember asking him where he was going with a sleeping bag and was concerned with where he would stay overnight and he said, "I'm going to help the people at our shelter." And this would happen about once a month.

Towards the end of that season when it was hard to get members to volunteer, Rabbi Jacobs, during a service when making announcements, made a petition for more volunteers probably in a way that was not too dissimilar to how Rabbi Miller or I have asked the same for our own shelter. There was

something about what he said that I found curious, that sparked my interest. I very clearly remember going over Rabbi Jacobs during the *oneg* and tugging on his *tallis*. Rabbi Jacobs, a towering 6'3" rabbi who felt like a giant to me in more ways than height, kneeled down and got to eye level and said, "Shabbat Shalom Philip, how are you doing?" and I asked him, "why do we have a homeless shelter?" And he said, "Well, because we have a warm place to keep people safe and cook them a hot meal during the cold winter nights and we are Jews, so that's what we do." I'll never forget that line, "we're Jews, so that's what we do."

At five I had no real idea what a homeless shelter was or why it needed to exist. Learning about the shelter helped me understand that there were people who were less fortunate than I was and that it happened for reasons that were sometimes beyond their control. I also learned that Judaism was much more than hanging out with friends and singing in services, but was also about being in service to God and my fellow person and there was no better way to do this than in fellowship with others.

Tomorrow night, Alyson and I and eight other parents are taking 30 of our high school students into New York City for the Midnight Run. We set out around 9:30 for New York City and while there we will be stopping our vans at various locations: sometimes in front of a church, or a particular train station, and sometimes just at a street where we know that it's an area where the homeless huddle together for warmth at night. When we stop the vans a small delegation of teens will get out with our chaperones and call out to see if there is anyone who needs a sandwich, or a blanket, or a coat, or a hot potato. Following our last stop at Penn Station we are going to head over to the Littman's to discuss the experience and I want to thank them for opening their home up to us every year. We'll be back at the temple no later than 3am and with just five or so hours of sleep we will get up and go to Religious School.

This is an experience that everyone going knows will be special. We actually have a waiting list for parents because they too know just how important this trip is. It's in their fiber and their being and a part of who they are. It's why there was such an outpouring of support from so many of you in our congregation and larger community who donated supplies for us to give out. On your way to the parking lot after services I want you to poke your head into the youth lounge. There you will see bags upon bags of supplies. On Sunday morning that room will be empty.

My Talmud class and I studied Talmud Bavli Bava Batra last year and we got stuck on this one passage on page 10a that reads:

R. Judah used to say that, “Ten strong things have been created in the world. The [rock of the] mountain is hard, but iron cleaves it. Iron is hard, but fire softens it. Fire is powerful, but water quenches it. Water is heavy, but clouds bear it. Clouds are thick, but wind scatters them. Wind is strong, but a body resists it. The body is strong, but fear crushes it. Fear is powerful, but wine banishes it. Wine is strong, but sleep works it off. Death is stronger than all, yet charity delivers from death, as Proverbs states, ‘Charity delivers from death.’”

Now the rabbis took this to mean that those who give charity, when they die, will not have to worry about judgment from God; that they would be saved from the harshness of dying. The rabbis believed that the statement from proverbs, *צְדָקָה תַצִּיל מִמָּוֶת*, “charity delivers one from death,” refers to the giver. However, knowing what we will encounter tomorrow night, I am certain that it refers to the receiver. As one person asked me two days ago when looking at the weather forecast for tomorrow, cold and raining, “are you really going out in that?” My response was, “What night could they possibly need us more?” With the understanding that what I say could be seen as sounding hokey or sappy, I am certain that tomorrow night the work of our group will save a life and not just in a spiritual sense. As our Tradition teaches us, “if you save a life, you save the world” and I’m sure our teens will understand what that means in short time. The work of charity is doing God’s work on Earth and while doing it, you can find God, as the Psalmist affirms,

אֲנִי בְצִדְקַת אֲחִיזָה פָּנֶיךָ אֲשַׁבְּעָה בְּהַקִּיץ תִּמְוֹנֶנְתִּי :

As for me, in [tzedeq, charity] justice I behold Your face [the face of God], I take my fill, wide awake of your image.

I am sure that each one of our Midnight Runners will find the face of God as they perform acts of *tzedeq*, justice, tomorrow night. And they will find the face of God, not in a mystic vision, but in the face of those they help. Because the giving of charity to others reminds each one of us that the individual we help is more than an animal that sleeps in a box, but is a precious human being who was made in the image of God and has the spark of God inside of them just like each and every one of us.

I hope that each one of 30 teenagers that we have going on the midnight run, if asked, “Why are you going into the cold rainy streets of New York City to do this?” that they will respond with, “Because I’m Jewish and that’s what we do.”

Shabbat Shalom