

## **Elul Sermon – *Gemilut Chasidim* (2010)**

Good evening Mr. Lindburgh. My name is Asher Knight. I'm here with Project Angel Heart. The door began to buzz – and I opened it slowly – unsure of the experience that lay ahead.

The year was 1994. I was fifteen years old. My Temple Youth Group – which was similar to DAFTY, our own youth group, chose to partner with an organization called Project Angel Heart for our year-long social justice project.

At the time, Project Angel heart was a “meals on wheels” service for men and women who were dying, at home, with AIDS. In the early 1990's, without some of the modern drug cocktails and better public understanding, contracting AIDS often equated to a slow, painful, and sometimes lonely death sentence.

Mr. Lindburgh was at home, dying of AIDS, alone. I was supposed to deliver food – and check-in on him. I vividly remember how I felt when I picked up the food and the printed instructions, telling me where to go and what to do.

Mr. Lindburgh lived on Locust street. (check) Ring Bell. (check) Announce yourself. (check) Go to fourth floor. (check) Deliver food. (check) Mitzvah completed (check)

But when I was buzzed through and I went upstairs, I had a different experience than what I was expecting. I met Mr. Lindburgh at the door of his apartment. He was in his thirties. He asked me to call him Danny – “Mr. Lindburgh,” he said “was his father's name.” He had a soft, gentle and warm voice. He invited me into his apartment and asked me to place the food in his refrigerator. He motioned to a chair – and we sat in his living room and just talked.

Danny told me his story. He contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion that he received following a car accident. He was slowly being killed by the blood that had saved his life.

Danny told me how he tried to keep his illness a secret. Yet, people started questioning him when the bruises on his arms and legs appeared. They stared and they whispered. They made assumptions and accusations. Colleagues didn't want to work with him. Acquaintances kept their distance. Friends called instead of visiting. And Danny sat, dying, in his apartment – alone.

I will forever remember Danny. I visited with him four times before he died. Our visits were less about the food, though the food was also important. Danny was the first person I had ever known with AIDS. He was, at the time, the youngest person I knew with a terminal disease. At first, I was terrified of meeting him, face-to-face in his apartment.

I wanted to deliver the food to the sick and dying man and get out of there as fast as possible. After meeting Danny, hearing his story, creating a relationship with him,

I saw him as a person – as another human being with needs, much like my own and with feelings and desires much, like my own.

The experience helped me to see the humanity in others, the humanity and, maybe even, mortality in myself and my life. Recognizing that the line between life and death is thin can help make us realize that what we do matters. We have the potential and the capacity to bring holiness, redemption, and healing into this world.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that a Jew is, “A person whose integrity decays when unmoved by the knowledge of wrong[s] done to other people.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, time has showed us over and over again that we are, in fact, often unmoved by the knowledge of the wrongs that face our world.

For example, maybe we know that in the past few years the United States government has taken in over 30,000 Iraqi refugees – people who interpreted and fought alongside our troops - and resettled them here, many in Vickery Meadow – with less than \$900 or any other support. We may know this, but do we do anything about it?

Maybe we know about millions of people around the world who are dying unnecessarily without water, access to medical care, or food. We may know this, but do we do anything about it?

Maybe we know that billions of dollars in aid were pledged to Haiti – and that the nations and people who pledged the money haven’t followed through. And maybe we know what message that sends to the millions suffering, begging for help, from the wide-spread flooding in Pakistan. How can they trust our word and our pledges, when we don’t follow through? How can they trust that we will see their suffering and be moved to take action? We may know this, but do we do anything about it?

We live in what is often called the “information age.” An age where there is more information in a week’s edition of the New York Times than was widely available in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But with so much information, so many views, so many conflicts and challenges and painful realities beaming through the television, the satellites, the fiber-optic cables, and downloading to our phones, the injustices of the world are now shockingly with us everywhere we go.

All of the loud drumming becomes easy to ignore – simply by the sheer volume – the overload of it all. We can barely distinguish the anguish. And we become, whether we like it or not, unmoved by the knowledge of the wrongs in our society. We become paralyzed by the failing education system, the refugees, the natural disasters, the plight of the poor, the pollution, the sick, the pain.

We are overloaded by the reality of our world.

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<sup>1</sup> *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, pg. 32.

The prophets of our ancient tradition called upon us for moral action. They rebuked our people for ignoring the plight of the poor and the weak. They cried: *Tzedek, Tzedek, Tirdof* – Justice, Justice, shall you seek. The Jewish prophets were committed to the idea that good religion responds to the injustices in the world.

When we recognize that the world as it is – is not the world as it ought to be - each one of us – individually and as a faith-group – have a responsibility to care for the victims of this often cruel and unfair world. We, as individuals and as a people, have the capacity to help God to make the world a better place in which to live.

We can bring dignity and courage and hope to lives of one another. Yet, we cannot fix everything that is wrong in this world. It is nearly impossible to fix the macro level challenges that face our planet. I don't know how I can help the *millions* in Haiti and Pakistan. I don't think that I can, alone, fix the school system in Dallas or the healthcare system. I doubt that my personal changes in consumption will have impact on the environment.

We cannot fix everything that is wrong in this world. But, as Heschel said – our integrity, as Jews and as humans, decays when we ignore these problems. So, where do we begin?

In Pirke Avot, the Ethics of Our Ancestors – we learn: *Al Shelosha Devarim Ha-Olam Omed: Al Ha-Torah, v'Al Ha-Avodah, v'Al Gemilut Chasidim.*

This is often translated as: on three things does the world stand: on Torah – on learning - on Avodah - on Worship, and *Gemilut Chasidim* – on Acts of Loving Kindness. In these weeks of Elul, our Shabbat evening sermons have focused on how learning and prayer, can be transformational elements in our lives.

Tonight, I want to focus on the last pillar – On *Gemilut Chasidim*. What does “acts of loving kindness mean?”

Rabbi Janet Marder explains that The Hebrew word, *Gemilut*, – comes from the verb “to grant goodness, to nurture, to nurse, to give in a way that overflows to another. The Hebrew word, *Chasidim*, comes from *chesed* – which means covenantal love, the kind of love that arises from commitment and obligation to another.<sup>2</sup>

Acts of loving kindness require us to be in relationship with another - to be obligated to the needs of another - giving from the best of ourselves to the soul of someone else.

In order to fulfill *Gemilut Chasidim* we actually have to be in relationship with other people. To know and to hear what pains them. To humanely respond to the humanity of another – to the needs of another – with kindness, compassion, mercy, and – charity, because we know them – as individuals and people.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.betham.org/sermons/marder040915.html>

Here in lies a difficult and challenging tension for our modern society. In this age of information overload - where we are acutely aware, 24/7, of the horrendous things facing world, we also find ourselves precariously removed from human interaction. We text or email instead of talk. We communicate in 140 characters. We interact, face-to-face, less and less. We live more solitary lives – where the notions of community and friendship are diffuse and almost unknown. How can we humanely respond to the needs of another when we are barely in relationship with one another?

Martin Buber taught us that, “All real living is meeting.” He argued that there are two ways of relating – the “I-It” relationship and the “I-Thou” relationship. In the “I-It” relationship everything and every person is an object or a function. The waiter serves our food. And we order and pay. The waiter has a function and so do we. Thus, the relationship is limited by the functions that we each have.

For Buber, the “I-Thou” relationship is far different. In the “I-Thou” – we treat everything and everyone as authentic. We relate ourselves and our lives to people through a reciprocal dialogue. The ideal “I-Thou” relationship is that of a loving couple: who care for each other, respond to one another, feel the pains and joys of each other, and who treat each other as other human beings.

Real living is experienced in the relationships that we build and the encounters we have. When we push ourselves to look beyond the functions and the roles we have and hallow our experiences – raise the level of reciprocity - we uncover the hidden and deeper issues facing the lives of those we are in relationship with. When we do this, we see that we have more in common with other people than we would first assume.

And by treating each other with the intent that each of us is made *Betzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, we have the opportunity to engage the holiness that lies both within each of us and between each of us.

When I first arrived at the AIDS victim’s apartment – we were in an “I-It” relationship. My function was to bring food to a dying man. Until, of course, the man asked me to sit. He changed the dynamic of the relationship by sharing his story and by asking me about my life. That’s when he transformed, in my eyes, from AIDS victim to Danny. From It to Thou.

In my eyes, Danny became human, like me – made in the image of God, like me, wanting friendship, companionship and security, like me, needing the basic necessities in life, like me. And while he had a scary disease, he was like me – with a mother, a father, siblings, a vision of what he wanted to become - how he wished his life turned out.

The act of bringing Danny food – the act of *Gemilut Chasidim* – the act of loving kindness, the good that I thought I was doing for Danny, in fact, became transformative for me. Because it gave me faith – at fifteen years old – in the redemptive power of relationship. It gave me faith that even when it feels like the world is crumbling, when people are dying and that there are more challenges than we can conceivably take on by ourselves – that we can make a difference. It gave me faith that there is still hope.

Hope in our ability to connect with others – to help bring comfort, healing, compassion, to all of our lives. And hope that my life can be changed by my own actions and deeds.

At this time of Elul, just outside the gates of the High Holy Days - we reflect on our lives and realize that maybe our personal relationships aren't what they should be, we recognize that we fall into the same conflicts at work or at home, our lives or our careers aren't exactly where we want we want them to be - we have the same arguments with our parents and our children. We simultaneously look back on the year that has passed and take stock of our lives and think of our future.

At this time, we need to know that personal transformation is possible. That acts of loving kindness can have an impact on the lives of those we help and on our lives as well. Transformation is possible when we act humanely and respond to each others humanity. Transformation is possible through recognizing the holiness that exists in one another. We have the ability to bring out – to draw out the Divinity that dwells in each of us – to experience God in everything that we do, in every meeting and relationship we have.

We have the capacity and the agency to impact our lives, the lives of those we know and those we have yet to meet through our acts of *Gemilut Chasidim*, our acts of loving kindness.

Shabbat Shalom.