

## **Give a Lift – Do a Mitzvah**

A Sermon for Rosh Hashanah 5767 - 2006

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I want to share with you a story that a friend told me this summer. It's about giving someone a lift. Now, for all of you kids out there, who are in elementary school, let me ask you.... Anyone of you driving yet?

Whew...that's a relief. Well, you know once you start driving, you might be inclined to give a friend a lift. I'm sure a lot of you like to give rides to your friends now, but I know it's hard to do so on your bicycle... the handlebars always seem to get stuck in the wrong places when you sit on them!

So, most of the time, if you're riding your bike and you pass someone you know, walking down the street to school, or wherever you're going, you might instead just ride real fast past them, give them a little "hey" and think to yourself how much quicker you are going to get there than your buddy.

Well, my friend told me a story about an Orthodox Rabbi... He was very careful about following the rules of Shabbat. One of those is that you don't drive on the Sabbath...you walk to the synagogue. And so every Friday night and Saturday morning, this particular Orthodox Rabbi walks from his house about 2 miles to get to the schul and lead the prayers.

Well you might say, 2 miles...that's no big deal. Two miles is say from here to the just about the McLean Giant food store. And probably for this rabbi, 2 miles was not such a big deal.

Now not everyone in this Rabbi's congregation was as strict with the way they followed the Shabbat rules. Most times people would walk, if they lived close to the schul, but some, who lived very far away, would drive, otherwise they couldn't make it to the service in time. Think of how someone would feel if they walked and walked and walked and walked, and when they finally got to the synagogue and went in, they heard, "Amen and Shabbat Shalom. Thanks for coming!" Then they just would have had to turn around and walk home, unless they were just coming for the oneg, and the chocolate top cookies, in which case they would be the first ones at the food table!

On this particular Friday night, the weather was bad... it was winter, it was cold and it was rainy. And this was not your normal rain, but it was raining cats and dogs, and the wind was howling! The Rabbi set out for the Temple, and after just stepping out of his house, he was already soaking wet. But, he set out on his 2-mile journey to the schul anyway.

A few minutes later, a car pulls up alongside the soaking wet rabbi. The driver in the car, rolls down the window, and over the howling wind, yells out, "Rabbi... can I give you a lift?"

The Rabbi stops in his tracks, looks around from under his big black hat, and stares at the driver.

The driver of the car, one of the members of the Rabbi's schul, who was very fond of the rabbi, thought for a moment, uh-oh, what did I just do? I just asked the rabbi if I could give him a lift on Shabbat?

The Rabbi looked at the man in the car... and with a hint of a smile, said, "You just did." And he turned away and continued walking.

You see the man in the car gave the rabbi a lift alright, but not by driving him to the schul on that rainy night...by caring about the rabbi and offering him his kindness and his help. That lifted the rabbi up...lifted up his spirits that someone cared about him...even though he was still one very wet rabbi by the time he got to the schul.

I'm telling you this story not because I want to talk about the importance of wearing a rain coat, or grabbing an umbrella before you go out of the house, which, by the way, is important, but because I want to talk to you this Rosh Hashanah about a very important responsibility that each of you has as a Jew... and that is to go out and give someone a lift.

If you remember the last few Rosh Hashanah services we've had together, I've brought you different sermons that I felt are important messages to hear, especially at this time of year. Last year my message was about waking up... or rather, setting your own alarm clock to make sure you wake yourselves up to be ready to face God on Rosh Hashanah. The shofar was God's wake up call to us...remember that?

Well, what would happen if everyone was awake, but no one was really doing anything? You know how hard it is to get up... you've been trying for about 3 weeks since school started. A lot of people get up, but are really just walking zombies, bumping into each other like those metal balls crashing into the bumpers in a pinball game.

When we wake up...I mean really wake up... we need to figure out what it is we're going to do with ourselves. And my hope is that on your "to do" list will be the words: "give someone a lift."

Okay, by now you might be saying, "what is this guy with the funny-looking hat talking about?" What I'm talking about is how better our world could be if each of us gave someone a lift. I'm not talking about actually picking up someone...that kind of lift. I'm talking about lifting up someone's spirits, caring about others, caring about the world, and making the world a better place. In Hebrew we call it performing a mitzvah. Think of how many people could be "lifted up" if each one of us did our part and performed mitzvot?

Think of it this way. Say all the world is one big choir, like Shir Harmony. And what makes Shir Harmony so great is that everyone who is a part of the choir adds their own unique voice and spirit to the choir. Each person's voice is important and special and it adds to making our choir what it is. Every member of Shir Harmony...whether they have a loud voice, or a soft voice, a high voice or a low voice, contributes to making the sounds we call music. And it's a beautiful sound. If everyone in our world contributed their voice to making the world a better place... think of the amazing place our world would be.

Just think what would happen if every person in the choir decided not to sing. Or what if people just held the music in their hands and kept silent? Think of that in terms of our world? What if people walked away from doing their part in the world? That's not good. Every voice is unique. Every person can add such promise to this world. We need their voices, we need their hands. If we all sing our parts, we can make beautiful harmony that can transform our world.

That's what it means to perform a mitzvah. Mitzvot teach us to care. And when we perform a mitzvah for someone, or a group of people, we are lifting their spirits...we are giving them a lift.

Most importantly, we are doing something holy. What is holy? Holy means that God is a part of it. Holy means that we're not just doing something because we feel like, but rather because God told us to do it. We're doing it because God gave us a special gift...a gift out of love... that gift is the Torah, and in it are all those commandments. Commandments are God's way of telling us that God is counting on us to do certain things in this world... the world that God made. And God wants us to care about taking care of the world just as much as God cared about making it. God said to us, after making the world in 6 days... I did the hard part, I made the world, I decided where to put the continents and the seas... I worked hard coming up with all those different kinds of animals and fish, the birds and the insects, I had to find names for all those different animals...you know how hard it was to come up with all those names? Dog and Cat are easy...but kookaburra and platypus, or how about wombat and kinkajou...those names weren't so easy to come up with! Yet, I made these things...and now it's your turn to take care of them, and take care of the world.

And so, God commanded us to do certain things --- out of love for caring for this world, and out of love for caring for each other. God didn't ask us to do these things. God didn't say, "Joey, when you finish watching TV and playing Playstation, emailing your friends, and playing soccer, see if you have time to do something nice for someone or help someone in need." No! God said "You will do your part. You will love your neighbor as yourself. You will make this world a better place, and then if you have time left over, after helping your mom or dad with the dishes, and you've finished your homework, then," God said, "you can watch Spongebob."

So each and every mitzvah we do, it's as if we're doing what God does. We're doing something holy. That's why a mitzvah is really a commandment. Some of the commandments are the ones that God wants us to do... these are kind of like the commandments that we hear at home all the time that our parents say to us... like brush your teeth, wash your hands, clean your room, put your dishes in the sink, do your homework... In the Torah, God gave us a bunch of commandments too that we are supposed to do, like leave food for the poor, visit the sick, honor your mom and dad.

There are also things that God asked us NOT to do too. These fall in the "Don't" category. Don't kill, don't rob, don't lie, don't hit your brother, don't ride your bike without your helmet, and don't leave your pj's on the floor." You know what I mean...the "don't" list sometimes seems a lot longer than the "do" list.

Anyone know how many total commandments there are?

Yes, 613... can you name them? Ready, go...

Well guess what...we don't need to know all 613. We don't even have to memorize 513 or even 113... we just have to know one. But we have to know that one really well, and make it such a part of our lives that we will never ever forget it.

And that one commandment that is so very important, that God wants us to put at the top of our permanent "to do" list is: What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else. Let me say it again: What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else.

In other words, if you want someone to care about you, you have to care about someone else; if you want to live in a world where people are friendly and caring, and compassionate; where the world is a great place to live, than YOU have to be friendly and caring and compassionate and strive to keep the world a great place to live.

What is hateful to you, do not do to anyone else is also heard another way in the Torah. Sometimes we say, treat people the way you want to be treated, or "Love your neighbor as yourself." God didn't mean, go next door to your neighbor, who you might not like because he keeps breaking your toys, and give him a big hug and say, "I love you." What God meant was... you need to care about other people, not just yourself. Your neighbor is made the same way you are made... and both of you are made in God's image... in other words, both of you are holy, therefore you need to treat him or her the same way you treat God, or yourself. You need to love that person's soul because God made it, and because God made your soul too. And sometimes when we show such concern for others, that's the place we find God.

That's an important commandment, and if we do that...if we follow God's mitzvah of caring about each other as we care about ourselves, we will make the world a better place, we will give our neighbor a lift, we will give ourselves a lift, and we will give God a lift too.

Think about all the mitzvot that can be done in this world. Every mitzvah helps make the world more complete... a better place. We call this Tikkun Olam, which means Repairing the World. Every mitzvah that you do helps...whether it is keeping peace in your house...Shalom Bayit; learning about your Jewish heritage...Talmud Torah; visiting sick people...Bikur Cholim; giving to the poor and the needy...Tzedakah; and caring about your fellow human being; Derekh Eretz. All of these mitzvot, and the hundreds of others that we are commanded to do because we are Jews, and that we want to do because we are good people, contribute to Tikkun Olam, to making the world a better place.

Well, you might say, how can I make a difference? I'm only in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, or I'm just a college kid, or even, I'm getting ready to retire, let someone younger do the work. The answer to that is: that you CAN make a difference at every moment in your life. There is always an opportunity to perform mitzvot, to show concern for others, to give someone a lift.

You might have heard the story of the little boy who was walking along the beach and came upon hundreds and hundreds of starfish that had washed up on the shore. They were all dying because they needed to be in the water to survive. Far up ahead in the distance, the

boy sees an old man picking up starfish and throwing them back in the ocean. The boy makes his way to the man, stepping over and around all the hundreds of dying starfish. He finally reaches the man and says, "Mr. what are you doing?" The man responds, "Can't you see, I'm saving these starfish." But the boy says, "You can't possibly save all these starfish. The beach is littered with them, there are too many." But the old man continued his efforts, and calmly replied, "I might not be able to save all of them, but I can save this one, and that one and that one, and that one." And with that, the boy got to work and started throwing back as many starfish as he could.

You see, you and I can't possibly repair the whole world ourselves, but we do make a difference when we try. And, we inspire others to do good things too. Caring about others, performing mitzvot are contagious! Each time we show concern for someone, help someone in need, give a ride to a friend, buy someone a lunch, open a door for someone, serve food at a soup kitchen, bring flowers to someone sick, give a hug to a friend who feels sad, volunteer in the community, and on and on... each time we perform a mitzvah, and give of ourselves, we are inspiring others and doing our part in making the world a better place. And we feel good doing it!

So, on this Rosh Hashanah, on the beginning of the New Year, when we are re-examining our lives, I want you to remember just one important phrase. And I'm going to make it easy for you to remember it. I am going to ask you to wear it. Wear it around your wrist. I have for each person in this sanctuary a white wrist band, that you will get as you leave. And on this white wrist band is that one phrase I always want you to remember and most importantly, perform. And that is, "Give a lift – do a mitzvah." Remember that each and every mitzvah we perform we give a lift...to someone else, to ourselves, and especially to God. Wear it on your wrist, but most importantly, keep it in your heart, and perform it often.

**Ani** v'atah, neshaneh et ha'olam. You and I can change the world.

**Ani** v'atah, az yavo'u k'var kulam. You and I do this, and everyone else will follow.

Give a lift, and when you do, it's as if you've just invited God into your life. Shana Tova.