



Temple Rodef Shalom

Cantor Allen Leider

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The Halal Cart

The following is a mostly true story that happened last year...

I'd like to tell you about a chance encounter and small act of caring that changed my life. My name is Liel Leibovitz, I'm a *New Yowkah* and I write for the Tablet, a daily online magazine of Jewish news and culture.

It was the day after Yom Kippur. I was feeling cleansed and ready to make the most of the New Year. I remember the rabbi's sermon vividly: She spoke about the concept of *chesed* – loving-kindness. She explained that *chesed* is the active response to *ahavah*, to love. *Chesed* is how we should act in the world, putting love in wherever we can. I learned that we can manifest *chesed* in many ways. One way is through *tzedek*/justice. We are taught that "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of a stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt". (I was a good listener that day!) Justice can be a result of compassion and loving-kindness.

Now I'm not naive, I know how messed up our world is today; distrust, hate, polarization. And maybe I am a little cynical, so I did not quite agree with the rabbi's premise that we can really change the world through tiny acts of love. Still, challenged by the sermon, I decided to try.

Feeling empowered on that morning following Yom Kippur (and the break fast where I had too much of my aunt's kugel), I set out into the world to do chesed, to seek out opportunities for random acts of loving-kindness. Perhaps I was a little friendlier and kinder to others in the morning, but my unexpected chesed moment came as I was looking for a place for an early lunch.

I decided to avoid the overpriced chain restaurants and pick up lunch at a street cart and take it back to my office. These carts often serve cabbies on a quick lunch break, construction workers, or garage attendants who bring their lunch and coffee with them as they head back down underground.

I don't know what led me to this particular cart. Maybe it was the colorful umbrellas or the smell of the searing kabobs, but I like to think that I was guided that day to meet Achmed.

The cart's owner was preparing for the day ahead, chopping onions and meat. Achmed was the young owner of the cart, working for the "Halal Guys". Halal has similarities to Kashrut – food that is permissible and prepared according Muslim law. As I walked up, he said

Achmed [Mike]: "*Ahlan wa sahlán*, welcome my friend, I am Achmed, how can I help you?"

I was struck by his warm welcome and sense of hospitality. And something, brought me back to the Rabbi's sermon on *chesed*.

I purchased a delicious chicken kabob - complete with rice pilaf and a can of soda. [*bring out rubber chicken on a stick*] I ate it there, sitting on the curb, somehow feeling like my conversation wasn't over yet. Maybe he thought I was nuts, but I just started rambling on about the sermon.

Me: [turn to him] You may not be aware of this, but yesterday was Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year for Jews. We fast and spend the day in prayer, looking at our lives, and asking God to forgive us for our sins. (The Halal cart owner nodded in solemn understanding.)

Anyway, at our Temple, the rabbi spoke about the power of small acts of loving-kindness. In Hebrew, it's called "*chesed*". I'd like to do that now!

Achmed: *chesed* (nodding)

Me: But I'd like to introduce myself, as you so graciously did when I came over here. My name's Liel. I'm a Jew, third generation American, originally from Russia and Poland, a dad of two, and I work right up Broadway as a magazine writer.

Achmed: I'm Achmed, I came from Egypt to join my family in this business. I am also a father of two.

Me: In this world there's too much distrust, too much hate, too much fear. In the rabbi's sermon we learned about two great teachers 2000 years ago – Hillel and Shammai. Each had hundreds of students and they often disagreed with each other. But even though they disagreed, they and their students would eat in each other's homes and treat each other with respect and dignity.

Achmed: Yes, my friend I understand, respect and dignity. But we also need to listen more to each other.

I just learned from my young nephew the concept of an "echo-chamber". I've been thinking about it. It's the idea that society today is more fragmented and divided than ever because we have forgotten how to listen and debate with others who have opposing views. In everyday life and through social media we surround ourselves with like-minded people. That's the echo chamber.

We ought to be genuinely curious about people who don't agree with us, and to know that we get stronger, not weaker, by engaging with ideas and people we disagree with. Perhaps that's how it was with your Hillel and Shammai.

Me: Perhaps so Achmed... And maybe I could have just ended there, but I was still thinking about whether small acts of *chesed* could improve the world and break down barriers between people. As so I asked him:

Me: How much are your meals?

Achmed: With everything?

Me: Yes, with everything.

Achmed: Just like yours was, \$8

Me: Then please, here's \$25. Please give the next three people who come up today a free lunch. (Achmed paused to think it over.)

Achmed: This is because of a Jewish holiday?

Me: Kind of. It's money I would have spent on food yesterday instead of fasting. But the bigger point is the idea of doing small acts of loving-kindness. Achmed, this world is broken. There is political divide, social divide, racial divide, economic divide... the list is long. And yet, there is great beauty and so much more that connects us and binds us together. I guess we just need to be reminded of that from time to time. More love, more peace, more hope, more decency is what is needed. Perhaps buying a few people a chicken and rice lunch is a small, but meaningful step.

Achmed: (smiling) You know what my friend? The next three people get a free lunch on you, and then the next three people get a free lunch on me. I'll ask them to pass it on. We are both Americans, and this land should be one of respect for one another and acts of,... how do you say it?

Me: *Chesed*

Achmed: Yes, chesed. Loving-kindness.

We both smiled widely. We shook hands, [*shake hands*] and we meant it. I said, "*as-salaam'alaykum.*" The only Arabic I really knew. He said, "*Shalom.*" I walked back to the office.

Beneath my feet, the subway system was still irreparably broken. Around me, the same crises abounded. Not far away, dishonest and prejudiced people lurked. My small act of *chesed* changed none of that. But it achieved something no less monumental—it gave two New *Yowkajs*, a Jew and a Muslim, a moment to share, a moment of joy and of hope. It opened, if only for a few fleeting minutes, a path to healing. Our world is broken, so we need to respond to it with love; more love, more peace, more hope, more decency. I was changed that day, and I continue to find small opportunities to bring more love into this world.

I hope you will too! Kein Y'hi Ratzon, May this be God's will!

[Follow with choir singing: More Love in This Land by Noah Aronson]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NeUbYuBwf4>

Based on

Liel Leibovitz, Healing the World, One Halal Cart at a Time
Tablet Magazine