



Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5772/2011

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"Help!"

Shanah Tovah. I hope all of you have had a good year, a happy year, a year of growth and learning. I can tell you I have had all of those things in spades. If the past year of my life has had a defining moment, I believe it occurred at the doctor's office. It's a blur now, but I'll describe what I can remember: an ultrasound machine, black and white images moving around on the screen, and the doctor's voice uttering a number: two.

We knew we were stretching the limits of our abilities a bit when we decided to have a second child only a year after the first. But we didn't think they would be twins. So when the doctor said two, my mind raced: three babies under 16 months, three car seats that would not fit in either of our cars, three helpless little beings, with only two of us to look after them. I found myself mouthing the words that Jews often recite at times of distress: *"Esa Einai el heharim; me'ayin yavo ezri?* I lift my eyes to the mountains; from where will come... my HELP?"

Our three children, Shoshana, Aaron and Jonah, are an incredible blessing, and, three months after the twins' birth, I can report that they are all doing great. I will admit to you, though, that those first moments in the doctor's office were overwhelming. I wondered exactly how we were going to do this. And yet as Jaimee and I began to lay out a plan, which involved asking our family for lots of help, I hesitated. We should, I felt, be able to do this on our own.

Doing it on your own is the American way. It's no wonder we don't ask for help when we've grown up hearing expressions like rugged individualism, do-it-yourself, and self-made man. I knew that the standard I was trying to live up to was unrealistic, and yet the pressure I felt was strong. I am thankful that due to the encouragement of others, and the insistence of my wife, I came around. I am thankful to have realized that although there may be a few of us who can truly go it alone in the world and succeed, for most of us this American standard is false. In fact, it was only when I reflected on it as an adult that I ever stopped to visualize the famous saying, pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. I realized that as far as I can tell, that physically cannot be done. This image of the American dream is really a symbol of doing the impossible.

If Jaimee and I had tried to follow in this American tradition, I am sure that we would have been snowed under by now, covered in bottles and onesies. Our memory of the twins' first months would have been eclipsed by exhaustion and stress. Fortunately, we didn't, and our family, friends, and this community have given us help beyond any of our imaginings: bringing us meals, feeding babies, playing with Shoshana; helping us run errands; bringing us gifts, offering moral support, a listening ear, suggestions and advice, and not least of all, hand me downs. Some of you have witnessed times when our living room is like Grand Central Station, when we're tripping over each other to get to the babies. It has been a crowded and chaotic abundance of blessing.

Our experience, and the help we received, may not be a stereotypically American experience, but I do believe it is very Jewish. It does not invoke an image of the Lone Ranger, whose mask, pistol and horse were all he ever needed. But then, I'm pretty sure the Lone Ranger wasn't Jewish! Today, I'd like to explore with you *our* tradition's model hero, and what his example teaches us about help: accepting help, asking for help, and what so many people in this community did for my family, offering help. Our hero, far from riding off alone into the wilderness, led hundreds of thousands of his people through the wilderness together to the land of Israel. I am speaking, of course, of Moshe Rabbeinu, our teacher, Moses.

In the story of our people, Moses is everything: leader, spokesman, general, prophet and teacher. But as a young man, he does not see himself as any of these things. Moses is nothing but a shepherd. He's never asked for help. And, he has no idea what he might be capable of if he did. When God calls him to his mission of leading the people out of Egypt, his response is that he can't. Standing barefooted before the burning bush, scared and intimidated, Moses stammers to God, "I have never been a man of words," and he begs God to choose someone else. The Eternal's response is a great teaching in itself. God doesn't tell Moses, as we might expect in an American folk tale, "You can do it." Instead, God reminds Moses of his brother Aaron, who speaks with no difficulty. "Even now he is setting out to meet you," God says, "and he will be happy to see you." God shows Moses that there are people in his life who would be glad to help him. With Aaron's assistance, Moses becomes capable of doing all of the things he couldn't imagine doing on his own. He is transformed.

How incredibly human is this biblical story! Most of us have no idea what we could achieve in life with some help from others, until it happens. We can recall moments in our lives when someone was there when we needed them: with the idea that propelled us forward in our career, a gift or

loan to help with a down payment; a shoulder to cry on when we lost a loved one; a listening ear when we didn't know what to do; a spouse, partner or close friend who provided indispensable help and counsel behind the scenes. But too often we forget to seek out this kind of help. We assume that we are all alone.

Moses' speech impairment – his weak spot – is there to show us what we can achieve, and how we can thrive, with a little help. But Moses' learning doesn't stop there. Once in the wilderness with the people, he seems to believe, even still, that his job is to take care of his flock, all by himself. He soon takes an important lesson from his father in law Jethro. Jethro visits Moses and finds him sitting and hearing every disagreement among the people, while his followers wait. Jethro looks on in disbelief as hundreds of people stand around all day long. Moses is trying so hard to meet the needs of each of them, and in so doing, he meets none. Jethro steps in to advise Moses: "You will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well," he tells Moses. He urges him to let others share the burden. This advice leads to the creation of a court of elders who hear the disputes of all the people, bringing only the very hardest cases to Moses for review. Can you imagine the relief Moses must feel when he realizes he doesn't have to do it all himself? How it might change his life, suddenly having time to think, and more time at the dinner table with his family.

Jethro shows Moses and the Israelites how their lives can be transformed if they help each other. I spoke with two members of our congregation recently about an experience that changed both of their lives. One of them is a very longtime member. As he has gotten older, it's increasingly hard for him to get out of the house. Still, it took time to convince him to ask for the help he needed. He didn't want to be a burden to another person, busy with their own life, and their own family. A few years ago, he finally agreed to let us put his name in the bulletin with other esteemed elders, hoping to find him a ride to the Temple. Months went by with no result. He was about to withdraw his request when another member decided to respond. She recognized this elder's name as a local community activist, and she thought it might be interesting to get to know him. Since then, the two of them have become almost like family. They attend services together regularly. They share season tickets to the theater. They have dinner together, along with her daughter, who has no grandparents living in the area. This relationship has changed both of these members' lives as well as their connection to the Temple. A few years ago, the younger member's only connection to TRS was through her daughter's participation in youth programming. Now, she serves on the board and is co-chair of a committee. That relationship, which began with a small offer of help, changed the Temple for her from an institution into a community.

From this experience we learn, as Jaimee and I did, that helping each other, and accepting help from one another, have a power to build and deepen relationships that is unlike anything else we do in our lives. It says in the Talmud that one who has more learning than good deeds is like a tree with many branches but weak roots; the first great storm will throw it to the ground. But one whose good works are greater than his knowledge is like a tree with fewer branches but with strong and spreading roots, a tree that all the winds of heaven could not move. We do many different things together at Temple Rodef Shalom – religious services and life cycle events, adult and youth education, concerts and dinners. We have stimulating conversations with each other and laugh together. These activities link us like branches spreading out and climbing towards the sky. But it is the acts of helping each other that give those branches their roots. It's when one of us listens to another with understanding, or offers words of comfort, that a fond acquaintance becomes a trusted friend. It's those times when members of our congregation have experienced moments of great need, and our community has mobilized to come to their aid, that make TRS the incredible community that it is. And it's when we join together in helping others outside our congregation, too, that we develop and nurture the roots of our entire community in a way that no religious service, or lecture, or sermon, can accomplish. As a recipient of so much help from our community this year, I learned that accepting help, whether on a physical, logistical, or emotional level, is not only OK, it's important, and it's part of what Judaism is about.

When I look at this community, at all the ways that we help each other and others, I am moved. And, when I look at the potential of this community, with its numbers, resources and talents, I am inspired. To hear how something as simple as offering another member a ride to Temple can bring our experience of community to a new level is to realize how much more we as individuals, and as a community, can do.

We at TRS take pride in our social action work. We have food assistance programs for the hungry and building projects. Twice each year we come together for Mitzvah Day. We have leaders who are currently seeking a deeper relationship with a residential home for at risk youth in the area. We have also advocated for important causes, including especially affordable housing. Through VOICE, in which we are one of about 45 local congregations, we have joined together with Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities to improve life in Northern Virginia. I will never forget gathering with other Jews and Christians at the Falls Church Mosque after the Fort Hood shooting, speaking one-on-one with members of the mosque about their lives and ours and offering support to the Muslim community at a

time when they were vulnerable. And, we do a lot for each other within this community as well. For our own members who are sick or otherwise in need, we have a network to provide meals, rides to the doctor and other help.

If you looked more closely, though, you would find that when it comes to our service programs, we don't have a broad base of participation. In fact, these services are coordinated and performed by 50 to 100 very dedicated members. It's rare that a new volunteer gets involved. Our congregation includes thousands of individuals. Of course, there are many who volunteer their time in acts of help that happen outside the Temple's walls. Still, I think it safe to say that, as Moses learned when God called him, we could do more. We should be doing it for the benefit of the people we help, both within and outside our congregation, and we should be doing it for ourselves. The Talmudic text I shared challenged each one of us to perform acts of help that outnumber our acts of learning, so that our roots will be strong enough to support our branches. How transformative would it be for our congregation, if the number of *g'milut chasadim*, or acts of loving kindness, that occur at Temple Rodef Shalom rivaled the number of acts of learning that happen here.

Today I challenge you to open yourself up to others through asking for the help you need, and through offering help to those around you. Think of this as a place where we support each other in every way. And, I challenge you to make the Temple's work of *g'milut chasadim*, loving kindness, a part of your life. Find a balance somewhere between every day, and twice a year at Mitzvah Day. Help at a soup kitchen every three months. Bring someone a meal twice a year. Organize a new service effort that *you* find engaging or join one of the working groups of Hineinu – Standing Together, on the environment, aging parents and youth. Be part of our delegation at the VOICE action on October 30, where we will advocate for addressing the foreclosure crisis in Northern Virginia, which includes some of the hardest hit areas in the country.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, who this July will become the new president of the Reform Movement, speaks about the choice we have to see our relationship to our congregation as one of "service", or one of "serve us". He teaches us that the culture of a congregation is vastly different depending on which of these two ways its membership sees that relationship. As much as this congregation can and should *serve* the needs of its members, the most fulfilling part of that relationship is not receiving the many services TRS delivers. It is seeing the Temple as a place we come to *be* of service ourselves: service to each other, and to our covenantal commitment to make the world a better place.

This year we hope to become more engaged in service as a congregation. One of the ways we have prepared to mark our 50th year is by performing as a community 50 thousand *mitzvot* – 50 thousand *g'milut chasadim*, acts of loving kindness, and acts of *tikkun olam*, repairing our world. These acts are an essential part of Judaism, and they must also be part of our life as a congregation. Through our website, we will count the *mitzvot* we do this year, so that we can feel the power of an entire community joining together to help each other and to help others.

I will tell you that it wasn't only at the beginning of my family's new adventure that I had a hard time accepting all the help that came our way. Countless times along the way I have felt like saying, "We have already received so much, and we can get by with less." And it's true, we could. But it's not really about that. It's much more. Each offer of help is a laying down of roots, and spreading them out underneath our entire community. Each act of loving kindness makes us closer, stronger and more immovable in the face of adversity. Judaism is a religion full of teachings but rooted in acts. It is acts of helping one another that will bring us closer to God and to each other, and it is these acts that will transform our community.