

April 9, 1993 Rachamanut Pesach Rabbi Aryeh Azriel

Mrs. Ginsburg was riding the bus when a young blond fellow sat down next to her. "Young man," she asked, "are you Jewish?" "No," he responded, "I am not." Looking at him again, she asked, "Are you sure you're not Jewish?" "No, madam, I am Irish-Catholic." They rode on a bit more. Mrs. Ginsburg eyed him again and asked, "Are you positive you are not Jewish?" After twice more explaining that he was not a Jew, the young man finally gave up and said: "Okay, lady, I am Jewish." To which Mrs. Ginsburg responded: "Well, you certainly don't look Jewish."

Like Mrs. Ginsburg, most of us keep our eyes and ears open to figure out who around us is a Jew. We notice noses and gestures. We look for Jewish stars, mezuzahs, and chais. We listen for certain words and expressions to identify who is a Mot – a Member of the Tribe.

How do we recognize a Member of the Tribe, how do we know who is a Jew? In Israel and even some places in America, the question has become a political football. The issue of membership in the Tribe turns on who your mother or, for a Reform Jew, mother or father might have been, or on whom the rabbi who converted you might have been. So, "Who is a Jew?" has become a technical question.

Judaism is something more than a badge or a birthmark. It is a life. The question is – what is the content of being a Jew? What are the qualities of life and soul that really identify a person as a Member of the Tribe, as a Child of the Covenant? Beyond the accidents of nose size and parentage, how do we really know who is a Jew? The content – of being a Jew which no longer should remain secret are our convictions about the worth of each one, our sense of being prisoners of hope – of never giving up, never giving in – our belief that we are miracle-makers with God, our appreciation of good guilt, of the importance of forgiveness and the desirability of reconciliation. If you are counting, that is six reasons, and you know that seven is a special number in Jewish life. So, what is that seventh ingredient for being an identifiable Member of the Tribe, that quality of character which really determines who is a Jew?

Jews must be rachamanim – merciful, compassionate people. We may not close our eyes when we see others who are in trouble. Our Torah states the case plainly: If you see your neighbor's donkey – even your enemy's donkey – fallen under a heavy load, you may not hide your eyes from them. You are required to stop and render aid, to help in lifting the donkey of your neighbor or your enemy.

To have compassion, rachmones as many of learned the pronunciation means to empathize, to identify with someone less fortunate, less blessed than we are.

The employees of the fashionable Omaha department store found the behavior of a bride-to-be puzzling. She kept picking up dresses of various materials and pacing up and down the aisles holding the material against her side, but never looking into the mirror. "It's what it will sound like. My husband to be lost his eyesight, and I want him to hear me at his side." Such sensitivity is rachamanut – compassion, empathy, putting oneself in another's place, showing true concern and love.

In our tradition, God is described as ha-rachaman,, – the compassionate One; or,, "el rachum v'chanun" God full of compassion and grace. Therefore, we, who are created in God's image, have the potential to be compassionate.

In the Book of Genesis, we are told implicitly to be our brothers and sisters' keepers. In Leviticus we hear the injunction to love our neighbor as we would love ourselves. The laws of Judaism stipulate that care is to be given for the stranger, widow, and orphan and even for animals. From the Talmud we are taught to visit the sick and assist the bereaved. The foundation for all of these is rachnones, compassion.

We know the word most prominently from the prayer for the dead, the Kaddish _____, "Oh God, full of mercy, compassion". In Hebrew letters רחמ suggested deeper meaning. Rechem means womb: rachamanut means the feeling which a mother has for her children or the feelings that siblings who share the same womb have for one another. For the Jew, this so-called female attribute is the foundation for human interaction. We are required to be sensitive to what hurts another and to attempt to alleviate pain whenever possible.

The call for compassion is thunderous in Judaism and, thank God, many among us do respond. I would not enumerate the needs, but I think the problem is best illustrated by the following incident.

It seems that an Afro-American man came to the front door of a mansion and said to the occupant, "I am hungry." The answer was: "Go round to the back door and I will meet you there." The white male occupant brought some food and said: "First, we must say a blessing. Now repeat after me – Our Father." The Afro-American man said, "Your Father." "No, no. Our Father." The man again said, "Your Father." Once more the mansion owner said, "Our Father." And the man responded, "Your Father." "Why do you keep saying, 'Your Father' when I say 'Our Father'?" The beggar explained, "If I say 'Our Father' that would make you and me brothers, and I am afraid that God would not like you making your brother come to the back porch for a piece of bread."

My friends, not only should we be checking and searching our deeds on the week of Passover, but also our attitudes. Yes, Judaism does teach that it's better to have positive deeds with a bad attitude than no good deeds at all. But we can aim higher. There is so much sadness surrounding us that it is easy to become callus, especially if it does not touch us directly. There is also the reality that our individual actions cannot erase poverty or homelessness, put an end to crime or drug addiction, eradicate racism and prejudice. But the Mitzvah of rachmanut tells us that we cannot harden our hearts. That has been the secret which has kept us Jews sensitive, compassionate, caring.

Let me suggest a quiz by which we can measure our rochmamut level.

- 1] Can you see the tears on somebody else's cheek?
- 2] Can you hear the sadness in somebody else's voice?
- 3] Can you smell the smell of poverty in somebody else's home?
- 4] Can you taste the bitterness in somebody else's life?
- 5] Can you feel the trembling in somebody else's hand?

If your answer was yes...

Involving ourselves with others beyond ourselves means doing God's work. Now we are talking about the very heart of religion. The religious act is to reach out to the transcending other. The phrase "reach out and touch someone" is more than a telephone commercial; it is the heart of the religious message. It began with Cain, the second generation who asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" And God's answer was "Yes" – which extended man's concern to his family. That concern was extended to include the entire nation with the command, "Love thy neighbor." It was further extended to include the entire nation with the command, "Love the stranger." And in the Book of Jonah, where God commanded Jonah to preach to the people of Nineveh, the enemy, it was extended to the whole world. Involvement with family, with community, with country, with the world – this is the compassion progression which makes us Jewish.

In an age of dual careers and professionalism, we still function through a network of organizations and institutions. Eliminate them and Jewish life dies. All the good hearts and emotions of Jewish life cannot function without the institutions of Judaism and the organizations which maintain them. Just as the veteran in Israel gives a month of service to his country, so every Jew must give service to his Jewish community. It is not the talking; it is the doing which counts. It all starts with a single person who moves beyond him or herself to touch someone.

As Jews we choose to care. It is a moral imperative fundamental to our faith. We are taught that our lives are like fruit, like fruit on trees we grow and eventually we ripen. Unless we open ourselves up wide and let others drink from our juices of caring and concern, then the seed of our very beings will be locked up forever. They will never be dispersed upon the earth, and that would be tragic.

In this analogy, it is our seeds which serve as our link to immortality. Contained within them is the memory of our acts of love and caring, of goodness, sharing, and compassion. We may grow old and wither like aged fruit; our seeds will take root and generate their own growth in life.

Thus, we read in the Talmud that there are ten strong things – iron is strong but fire melts it; fire is strong, but water quenches it; water is strong but the clouds evaporate it; clouds are strong but wind-spirit drives them away; men's spirit is strong but fears cast him down; fear is strong but death is stronger; but acts of caring survive even death.

The story is told of three angels who were called before God and sent down to Earth with orders for each to locate and return with the most precious thing in the entire world. The first angel found himself in a prominent yeshiva. The halls of the school were filled with sounds of earnest debate and study. A distinctive aroma permeated the air; it was the scent of lovingly cared for and earnestly read books. It was a special smell, the fragrance of learning. The angel cupped his hands together capturing just a small sample of the fragrance that filled the yeshiva. He ascended to heaven where he appeared before God. He released the handful of yeshiva air in the Creator's presence and explained that it carried a sacred aroma which represented human striving to comprehend God's laws and lore. The angel looked to God for some kind of reaction. God seemed impressed but said nothing.

When the second angel descended, she found herself in the midst of a joyful synagogue service. The heart-felt prayers of the congregation lifted upward to the angel as she hovered just above the bimah. The prayers seemed to take on a life of their own, so much so that the angel thought she was back in heaven, standing before God. She explained where she had been, what she had done and then she set the captive prayer free and it called out for God and all the assembled angels to hear. Again, God seemed impressed but uttered no words.

The third angel came upon a busy street; masses of people were crowding the sidewalk, hurriedly trying to go about their own way. Cars and cabs and busses were blocking the streets, honking their horns, everyone seemed to be in his or her own world, oblivious to other people around them. The angel saw that no one seemed to notice the man in rags lying on the sidewalk; everyone just walked around him. Everyone that is, except for a single teenage boy. The angel watched, transfixed as the young fellow went over to the lonely man in the crowd. He had no money to give him, but he had time and he had the desire to provide the much-needed warmth and friendship. The boy and man sat together for a few minutes, and it was obvious that the boy's kindness made a real difference to the lonely, ragged man. This was clear to the angel too, for he noticed a single tear in the corner of the man's eye. It was a tear of joy and gratitude, and it was about to roll down his cheek.

The angel snatched the tear up before it could reach the man's cheek, hurried back to heaven, and appeared before God. He held the tear up for God to touch; it was still warm. The angel told God how the tear had come to be and when and then he spoke. "My fellow angels brought back very precious things from Earth. Those things are certain proof that there is a strong bond between You, O God, and those who you have created. It is a bond forged by study and prayer; but the tear which you now hold in your hand represents much more than words that praise you. It represents the practical application of your teachings. It is a testament to the fact that people are capable of applying the most important of your lessons. It proves that people who care can do God's unfinished business. They can help each other."

The angel looked to God for some sort of reaction. God did not speak. The Creator could not speak. Instead, the angel saw a tear, but not the one he had brought back with him from Earth – now, this tear was welling up in God's eye. It was this tear that told the angel he really had found an example of human compassion, the most precious thing in the entire world.

My friends, we are all responsible for doing our part to complete God's unfinished business. We can do this best by being proud, knowledgeable Jews, and by living our Judaism openly and daily. I pray that this Pesach will find that there are no more secret Jews, and that the values and ideals of Judaism will no longer be secrets for us or for the world. Amen.