

## "No Good Deed Goes....."

"No good deed goes unpunished." Keep that thought in mind because it will become critical later.

Tomorrow morning, we begin the book of Sh'mot (Exodus) and the story of the Jewish people in Egypt. Let's assume we all know the "basics" of the story, about the rise of a new pharaoh in Egypt who sees the Hebrews as a threat, enslaves them and then tries to kill all male Israelite babies. Let's concentrate only on Moses and his early life and the three events that occur right before he becomes leader and lawgiver of the Jewish people.

The reality is we know very little about Moses' early life other than being told that he is born to Hebrew parents, separated and raised by Pharaoh's daughter. That is all we are ever told about his formative years.

The story of Moses picks up with him as an adult and going out one day to see how the slaves in Egypt labored. On his self guided tour, he watches an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. Moses looks around, sees no one, and decides to intervene. He stops the beating by killing the Egyptian and in an attempt to hide his actions, buries the body. This was an incredibly heroic act for a prince of Egypt, and all for a lowly slave.

Yet, the story doesn't end there. The very next day, Moses witnesses two Hebrew slaves fighting with each other. Like the previous day, Moses cannot just look the other

way. Outraged he intervenes, turning to one of them and saying: “What are you doing? Why do you strike your brother?”

I can just picture Moses, an Egyptian looking at the two Hebrews and puzzled by what was happening. He must have thought: don't these Hebrews have enough problems that they have to fight among themselves? Maybe Moses, especially in light of the previous day's events, was already identifying with the victims of his society. Whether Moses knew of his Hebrew origins at that time or not, he was an Egyptian and finding himself questioning the oppression his people were inflicting on the Israelites.

But nothing could prepare him for what happens next.

One of the Hebrew slaves, the one he just pulled away from killing his fellow Israelite, turns to him and says: Who are you to rule over us? Are you going to kill me like you killed the Egyptian yesterday?” (Exodus 2:13-14). In other words: Who the hell are you, Moses, to lord over us and tell us anything! You think **you're** safe? I know your little secret! You are the one wanted in connection with the murder of that Egyptian and I'll expose you!

Moses then realizes that he is a wanted man, his secret is not safe and he is going to be arrested. He leaves Egypt and flees to the wilderness of Midian. There, of course, he will one day come face to face with G-d.

Now, remember what I said earlier, namely, “No good deed goes unpunished”? Think about that here. Not so much that Moses helps a Hebrew slave and the next day is betrayed by a Hebrew slave. That’s irony. But there is a lot more at work here.

The Torah made it a point to emphasize that on that first day of his tour of Egypt, there was “no one around” when Moses stopped the Egyptian from beating the Israelite. There were *no* witnesses to his act. So how did that Hebrew who confronts Moses know about what Moses did just the previous day? One biblical commentator offers a most interesting possibility: the slave who was threatening to expose Moses was the very same person he saved the previous day!

Talk about ingratitude!

And talk about everything you have ever lived for collapsing in seconds. All because of doing a good deed for a stranger!

Can you imagine what must have gone through Moses’ head? His entire life was destroyed because he helped a stranger, because he was the kind of person who stuck his neck out for someone. I think of Moses and what I would have felt if I were him: "I will forever be forced to live life as a fugitive because I tried to be good and didn’t turn a deaf ear to a cry for help."

What is the lesson here? No good deed goes unpunished. Indeed, but look at what happens on day three.

Moses escapes Egypt and makes his way to Midian. No sooner there and he sees some women near a watering well harassed by shepherds. Now, the last time he intervened on behalf of a stranger, his life was destroyed. What would you do here?

Moses intervenes and rescues the women.

Fortunately, these women happen to also be the daughters of Jethro, the priest of Midian. Jethro is most grateful, asks Moses to join his tribe, and offers his daughter Zipporah to be his wife.

Good deal!

But Moses teaches us a greater lesson.

If the story of Exodus has several ideas and motifs, maybe one of them can be found in how Moses behaves on day three, behavior that continues throughout his career. In his 40 years as leader of the people, one of the recurring “beats” in the life of Moses is that of a person who remains steadfast to his values and who always goes to bat for people regardless of the consequences. He will often stick his neck out for people who will never show him any sense of gratitude. People will repay his kindness, loyalty, and faith with betrayal, anger, and resentment. And yet, Moses will *never* abandon who he is and what he believes he should do on behalf of others.

As we start a new year, along with all the weight loss goals, improving our lifestyle choices and family commitments, more than a few of us will try to improve our

behavior toward others, striving to become better people. A lot of obstacles stand in the way of that goal including the ingratitude of those we try to befriend. Moses teaches us that we can live by the ideas we cherish *regardless of how others react*.

There is an expression in our faith: “chesed shel emet” – authentic kindness. That is when you do a good deed without ever expecting to be paid back for the act. When we shovel dirt on the grave of a loved one or a friend at the cemetery to assist in the burial, that difficult and often painful gesture is an act of “chesed shel emet”. That person can never repay you for that beautiful act of love.

As we begin this year, may we think of the core values and ideas we cherish, not the least of which is the kindness we can show to others as deeds of “chesed shel emet”. Let us do them because those actions are who we are. Regardless of whether they are gratefully accepted or contemptuously rejected, we can promise this year that we will remain true to them. I can think of no better resolution for the New Year.

Amen