**“The Day for Giving the Shirt off Our Back”**

It was a beautiful day in August, and Ashirah, the kids and I were at a park kicking a soccer ball around, lying on the grass, playing cards, and generally having a good time. The weather was perfect and hours passed in what felt like minutes. When it was finally time to go, we noticed that the back of one of my son’s shirts was covered in big splotches of green. Ugh, goose poop! This was one of his favorite shirts and he had somewhere to go after. I, on the other hand, was just heading home. What to do? Looking down at my favorite and most importantly clean Buffalo Bills t-shirt, the choice was obvious. And, that is how I found myself driving home in a shirt two sizes too small, with its back covered in goose poop.

There was something about this experience that made me smile. I had often heard the Mitzvah, yes, the Mitzvah, of “giving the shirt off our back” as a mark of generosity, but I never actually had a chance to test it out myself. The moment felt profound. Being able to literally give the shirt off my back to someone I loved made me happy: happy as a parent, happy as a Jew, and, heck, happy as a human being.

What is it about us as human beings that so many of us are willing to step in at a moment’s notice, not just for family members, or community members, but for complete strangers? More than just lending a shirt, we willingly give our time, energy, money, toward people and causes that matter, even if we aren’t personally attached to them.

This winter we saw this firsthand as three-feet of snow blanketed our region in less than 24-hours, and un-Godly winds swirled around cutting us off from airports, highways, and even our front doors. This was no mere blizzard. This was a Buffalo Blizzard.

Tens of thousands of us, including many in this room, were kept without power for days, trapped, cold, scared, and alone. It was in this moment of Biblical calamity, that something amazing happened. People found each other. People helped each other. People saved each other. Piloting snowmobiles, or trekking around in snow shoes and skies, private citizens stepped in where the government could not. 47-people lost their lives, including one of my neighbors, but countless others would have died if not for the quick action and huge hearts of Western New Yorkers.

In the midst of this, a small Facebook group, started during the storm of 2014 by a Northtowner named Erin Aquilina grew from 700 to 7000 to 70,000. Erin, together with her friends, Kristin, Erica, Jackie and Lynn, curated thousands and thousands of posts. Erin’s Facebook page became a lifeline to people throughout the region.

Desperate people, like a woman who thought she had talked to her brother for the last time, as he frantically sought shelter on Jefferson and Broadway. He told her on the phone, he didn’t think he could hold on much longer. When the overwhelmed National guardsmen and 9-1-1 could offer no meaningful response, a man on the Facebook page said he lived nearby. He personally went out and brought the brother to safety.

There was another situation where a woman was in labor and could not get to the hospital. The Facebook group connected her to a pair of doulas who guided her through the process over the phone and helped her to have a safe and healthy birth.

In another case, a family actually brought the body of someone who died outside of their house and kept it there until authorities could come and collect it.

There were hundreds of other desperate situations: diabetes patients in need of medication, new parents looking for baby formula, wheelchair bound individuals caught without caretakers, and people without heat looking for shelter. Each and every time people came forward. Not just one person, but dozens and dozens of individuals, all complete strangers with one another, whose only link was this particular Facebook group. Watching it unfold in real-time was absolutely awe inspiring. And, this was only a small fraction of the acts of Chesed, loving kindness, over those harrowing five days.

*Just by show of hands: How many of you were helped by someone during the storm? How many of you helped someone?*

What is it that inspired so many of us to do so much, often risking life and limb for people they had never met before? More than just offering a shirt, people had been willing to give their full selves, even at the risk to their own lives.

Charles Fritz, a US Air Force Captain in World War II, led a team of researchers in the early 1970s into disaster-struck areas around the world to conduct interviews. All in all they conducted 9,000 interviews. Disasters, he proposed, create a “community of sufferers' ' that allows individuals to experience an immensely reassuring connection to others.

This type of community erases societal inequalities, and creates a temporary social utopia. This is exactly what happened for us during the blizzard when we became a true “community of sufferers.”

Reporter and author Sebastian Junger, writes that the willingness to give something vital, to people we barely know is an essential part of what it means to be human. Based on his experience in Afghanistan and other war torn areas, Junger writes, “humans don’t mind hardship, in fact they thrive on it; what they mind is not feeling necessary.”

The rabbis have a concept called *Pikuach Nefesh*, to save a life. Normally, we think of this as an out observant Jews have if the rules of our tradition place them or someone they know at risk. *Pikuach Nefesh*, for example, is the rule that enables pregnant women to eat pork, doctors to work on Shabbat, and astronauts in space to use electricity even at times it is normally restricted. Saving a life comes first, no matter what.

But, the example the rabbis use in the Talmud, is a child who falls into the water or into a deep pit. The Talmud in tractate Yoma 84b, in both of these cases one does not wait for a court of law to decide what to do, instead, “one who is vigilant and acts quickly is praiseworthy.” As the rabbi’s remind us in a line from the Torah portion we will read tomorrow afternoon in Leviticus 18, “Chai Bahem” “Live by them.” To which the rabbi’s infer and “not die by them.” If saving one life is like saving the whole world, the rabbi’s say, then standing by as someone dies is like destroying the world. We must be there for one another, no matter what.

Junger tells the story of a true “*Pikuach Nefesh*” experience he had as a young college graduate that has stayed with him his life. He was hitchhiking across the Northwest as a way of escaping the “predictable” life he had growing up in a Boston suburb. He wanted a chance to prove his worth to his family and friends. In the middle of the journey by a highway overpass in Wyoming, he noticed a bedraggled man approaching him. Junger tensed up, expecting to get robbed. What happened next absolutely blew him away.

After questioning Junger about what supplies he had, the unhoused man did something completely unexpected, handing Junger a lunch box with a bologna sandwich and a bag of potato chips, the only food he had in the world.

This incident stayed with Junger the rest of his life and became the foundation for his recent book that Cantor Frank alerted me to, Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging. In it, Junger suggests your tribe are the people you feel compelled “to share the last of your food with.”

The term Junger used, a Tribe, stood out to me as a rabbi. Jews and Judaism can be called many things - a faith, a religion, a nationality, an ethnicity, a civilization. But, we can also be called a Tribe. And, adapting Junger’s definition to our community, perhaps we best define ourselves in one simple way: we are a collection of people willing to “give the shirt off our back” to anyone in need. More than Torah, Talmud, tradition, prayer, this is the way we can describe ourselves standing on one foot.

Watching you, my beautiful congregation, I have seen the generous spirit that infects this place. Again, and again, and again over the course of this year, members of our community have brought meals to homebound individuals miles and miles away, helped individuals experiencing medical crisis get safely to the hospital, offered an ear to listen, a shoulder to cry on, a meal to eat, to strangers and friends alike. We do this not only for one another, but to whomever walks through our door.

Eleven years ago during our first High Holy Days, I invoked the memory of three of our spiritual leaders who had set the foundation of who we are: Nathan Gaynor, Daniel Kerman and Susan Wehle. Each of these incredible people worked tirelessly to support the needs of our members, pouring their hearts and souls into making our lives better. And, each of these individuals died young. I called them our Makechei HaSharet, our ministering angels. In that first Yom Kippur together as Congregation Shir Shalom, I invoked their memory calling out in their names: “We were there for you, we were there for you, now be there for each other.”

This was my hope and dream for our new community when we officially incorporated in 2012: to be a community of compassion, a community of kindness, a community of generosity. For us to truly be, as Psalm 97 says an “Or Zaruah La Tzadikim, U’L’yishrei Lev Simchah,” “A light to the Just, a joyous reminder to the upright.”

And, friends, I can honestly say now in 5784 more than “this who we aspire to be”, “this is who we are”.

This past year has been a hard year for myself and my family. We have gone through a lot of health concerns and post pandemic struggles. Because of this, I haven’t always felt my best. Sometimes, I have come into the office feeling less than ready to do the duties of the day. I have not always felt the usual spark that I normally have as a rabbi. This is disappointing to me, because I do not want to disappoint you.

And, yet, as deflating as it has been, I could not really get discouraged. Because, each time I even thought of being discouraged, one of you would step up to the plate - whether it was Cantor working tirelessly to make our services beautiful and meaningful every single week, Joanne filling in all the gaps needed to keep us running at any time, any hour, Nancy and Renae in our office constantly going above and beyond. Our executive committee and board of directors led by Todd Sugarman, a man who personally came here in here every day before Rosh Hashanah to make sure our synagogue was ready for the holidays, our Chivattes team, Women of Shir Shalom, Men’s Group, Worship, Community Religious School, and our new Adult Education and Social Action committees. I would list names, but there are too many to mention. When I was at my lowest, it was you - all of you - that as the Psalmist says in Psalm 118, “Min Hametzar Karati Ya” from the depths Ya called out to me, “Anani B’Merchav Ya,” and Ya answered me from the emptiness.

Thankfully, I am doing much better now and I cannot thank our board and community enough for all the support my family and I have been given along the way.

Today is the day where we demonstrate our accountability to one another and to the greater world. To that end, if there is anything I have done wrong to you, I hope you will forgive me. I am truly sorry.

As Isaiah admonished our ancestors thousands of years ago in the Haftarah for Yom Kippur: “Is this fast I desire? A day to starve ourselves, bow our heads like a bulrush, to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

No, this is the fast I desire:

To unlock the fetters of wickedness,

And untie the cords of the yoke

To let the oppressed go free;

To break off every yoke.

It is to share your bread with the hungry,

And to take the wretched poor into your home;

And when you see the naked, to clothe them.”

This last line from Isaiah 58, is exactly the message I am trying to convey tonight. After all, what is “clothing the naked”, but another way of saying, “give people the shirt off of your back.”

We have truly become a community - a collection of individuals- willing to do this. To that end, I had Seth Greene’s company Market Domination prepare stickers for you to wear over the holiday that announce: “I would give you the shirt off my back.”

Wear them proudly. You deserve it.

G’Mar Chatimah Tovah, “May you be written and sealed in the Book of Life.”

An easy and meaningful Yom Kippur.

**Reference:**

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