

President's Yom Kippur Address, September 18, 2010

One of the commandments that we speak about today is to not "Harden your heart." I try to take this idea and try to make it fit into my life. There are many ways you can "open your heart."

Sometimes, it does not take much effort to do and sometimes it takes a lot of effort to do. Many times the rewards that you thought you would get are not what they turn out to be.

There are many ways to soften your heart.

Here are a few that I have come up with:

If you have:

5 Seconds - You can hug someone

1 Minute - You can hug 12 people

5 Minutes - You can call someone on the Mi Sheberach list and see how they are feeling and offer some assistance. It seems to me the least helpful thing to say to someone is, "if you need help, please call." Most of the people I know want to be self-sufficient and would rather do anything than ask for help, so instead, offer something of your own, such as, "Do you need any help with some yard work? Can I pick you up something while I am at the grocery store? Or something similar to that.

30 Minutes - You can visit the sick.

One story I will always remember is when I first joined this temple 17 years ago, the first two services I attended were Rosh Hashanah, and I met a few people. Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, I had an accident and landed up in Hackettstown Hospital for a week, while they patched me back together and gave my body time to heal. While I was in the hospital, a gentleman named Art Sirkis came to visit me. Art was a temple member who lived in Hackettstown. Art came and talked with me for a little while and he also brought me a gift, a copy of "Chicken Soup for the Soul."

Since I was on a lot of medication and was having trouble concentrating for more than a few minutes at a time, this book was perfect, because it contained many inspirational short stories. I had never met Art before that day, but his act of simple human kindness has remained with me for 17 years, and I try my best to repay Art by passing along his kindness in Spades to others.

1 Hour - You can join the temple road crew as we clean up route 57.

2 Hours - You can volunteer at an animal shelter or a nursing home. You can work at a soup kitchen or work to gather food for the hungry. You could become an advocate for a good cause. It makes it much easier to do if you truly believe in the cause, such as my wife

Iris, who has been working at a center to rehabilitate and nurse wild animals back to good health with the goal of putting them back in the wild.

1 Day - A few years ago, Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach had been invited to a prison in upstate New York to perform a Hanukkah concert. There weren't even enough Jewish prisoners to form a minyan. Shlomo shlepped 3 hours up to the prison and performed well. After the concert, there was a small party. When the party was over, the Rabbi asked the warden if he could visit the rest of the prisoners. Shlomo went to every cell and hugged, kissed and talked with each inmate. Then he went to the kitchen, recreation room and any other place he could go to make sure he didn't miss anyone.

When he was all done and ready to leave, a big, burly inmate with a scarred face came running after the rabbi. "Please wait," he called. The Rabbi stopped and waited for the inmate to arrive. He addressed him, "Yes, my holy friend?" The man shouted out, "Rabbi, I loved that hug you gave me, could I have another one?" The rabbi gave him another hug, and after they finished embracing, the inmate said "Rabbi, no one, no one ever hugged me like that before." Tears ran down his face and he continued, "You know Rabbi, if only someone had hugged me like that ten years ago, I surely wouldn't be in this prison today."

4 Months - You can follow the example of Suzanne Marr, who is opening up her home, her heart and her family to host exchange student Betina Barbalat. This is a wonderful Mitzvah that she is able to share our culture with Betina and for Betina to share her culture with us. I hope you all get the chance to meet with her while she is staying here with Suzanne.

A Lifetime - This is the story of a woman named Sonya, who escaped from Germany during the Holocaust. Her entire family had been taken away by the SS. She made her way to New York City, where she found work doing needlework in a large department store. But she had closed herself off to the world. She did her work efficiently and quietly, never speaking to any of the other women who sat near her.

One day while sitting in the lunch room, Mrs. Stein, who was on the refugee assistance committee, sat down and spoke to Sonya. "We have two children from Germany, who have been through so much, the girl is 10 and the boy is 7. They need a home, not just a place to live, but a home.

Sonya thought, 10 and 7, those are the ages her niece and nephew would be now, but Sonya thought they would remind her too much of what was taken from her. And she replied, "I cannot."

Mrs. Stein asked if she would think about it overnight. Sonya said "No I can not." She went home, and for the first time since she had arrived from Germany, she started to cry. She went to her closet and found 3 old family photos, her husband, her son and her sister. It hurt to look at them, but it also brought comfort to her. And she knew it was time to start reaching out to other people. She slept peacefully for the first time in a long time.

The next day, she saw Mrs. Stein and asked if the children still needed a home, and when Mrs. Stein replied "Yes," Sonya said she would share her home with them. Mrs. Stein said she would bring them over later that evening.

When Mrs. Stein brought them to Sonya's apartment, the two children looked so ragamuffin and sad, but there was something familiar about them that tugged at her.

"Sonya," said Mrs. Stein, "this is Liese and Karl." These were the names of her niece and nephew, but it couldn't be. Miracles like this don't happen. Sonya had a puzzled look on her face.

Mrs. Stein noticed and asked "Sonya, is something wrong?"

Sonya shook her head, still staring. The girl lifted her eyes, wide and dark, wrenchingly familiar. It was as if she was searching Sonya's face, too. And then the boy cried out.

Karl, asked Mrs. Stein, "Are you all right?"

The boy pointed a trembling hand towards the three pictures Sonya had set out the night before. He ran towards the bureau, grabbed up the picture of Sonya's sister, held it to his heart and cried "Mama!"

So today, I urge you to open your heart, take chances, seek to help those who need the help the most. While doing this, I am sure that you will find that the people who get the most benefit out of your helpfulness will be those closest to you.