

Message for *Shabbat Korach*: The Transformative Power of *Hesed*.

Delivered Friday 8 July 2016 at Congregation Beth Torah

Some of you may have heard the name Nelson Glueck. Dr. Glueck was a world-renowned archeologist, rabbi and scholar who served as president of the Hebrew Union College in the 1950's and 60's. The first book he published was his Ph. D. dissertation, titled *Hesed in the Bible*. This book has inspired me ever since I picked up a copy some 20 years ago at the HUC library sale.

Like many Hebrew words, *hesed* cannot be accurately translated into one English word, but we can try. *Hesed* means “grace, kindness, love, charity, providence, compassion and care”. Obviously, it's all good. *Hesed* means all the things we aspire to do as individuals and as a congregation. Glueck teaches that “*hesed* is received and shown only by those among whom a definite relationship exists.” In other words, *hesed* is based on the common understanding that if I do *hesed* for you, you will also do *hesed* for others. *Hesed* is, or should be, at the foundation of every community.

Hesed is such a central concept in the Hebrew Bible that it appears more than 250 times! Fear not, we shall not review all 250 instances of *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible this evening. But this Shabbat is one of getting to know each other, so I thought I would share with you my favorite example of *hesed*.

It is found in the book of Ruth. For someone like myself who chose Judaism at age 16, Ruth is very dear. First, because Ruth is the only convert who gets a

book of the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, named after her. Secondly, because Ruth has a very famous grandson, King David. It shows me that we Jews are not afraid to acknowledge that we come from a diverse background –not then, not now.

As you may recall, Ruth grew up in Moab, just outside the land of Israel. In Moab, she met her first husband but sadly she became a widow early on. Then, instead of going back to her tribe, Ruth makes a decision that would change Jewish history (Remember: No Jewish Ruth, no King David ...). Ruth decides to stay with her adopted family and people, and returns to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi. So, what do you think Naomi calls this beautiful act? Naomi calls Ruth's act *hesed*. Naomi felt the transformative power of *hesed*.

What proof do we see that Ruth's life also changed, that it was not just a matter of changing geography, but a fundamental change in her ethical and spiritual composition? Ruth "gets it," and begins to practice *hesed*. Ruth knew the transformative power of *hesed*. When we choose to do *hesed*, we choose, in fact, to be Jewish.

I know that we often talk about converts as Jews-by-choice, but I want to suggest that all of us, whether we were born Jewish or not, face a choice daily. We are all called to practice *hesed*, and we must choose *hesed* day in and day out.

At the very onset of my Jewish journey, I was the recipient of *hesed*. I know it might sound strange, but I decided I was going to be Jewish and a rabbi at about the same time. At age 16, I suddenly knew that this life-path brought together my passion for learning languages, my love of learning, and my desire of being a religious leader. Yet, I now know that the actual blessing was not what I discover about myself, but rather the opportunity of being part of a wonderful Jewish community that practice *hesed*.

It was August of 1985 when I was first invited me to come to services. I attended services that Friday and ... well, the rest is history. By the upcoming High Holidays, a month or so later, I had learned how to read Hebrew and was singing in the synagogue choir! Mind you, I was not Jewish ... not even close! I cannot tell you how welcoming and embracing that congregation was. I always said that had I landed at a different congregation, my life would NOT have become what it is. I did take the first step, but they walked with me the rest of the way including paying for my plane ticket for my admission interview in Cincinnati, Ohio, at the Hebrew Union College. To me their care, love, concern and welcoming embody the Jewish ideal of *hesed*. To this day, I know that I learned what *hesed* means because I felt the transformative power of *hesed*. This is our daily challenge: to use the power of *hesed* to make our lives better.

The *hesed*, the grace, gentleness and sympathy that we put into everything we do is what makes the difference. In the last few weeks, you have showered Kris and I with immense *hesed*. In the last few days, you have shown me, at

the many *shiva* calls I was honored to lead, what *hesed* means. My heart overflows at the sight of *hesed*.

Over twenty years ago, a little book called *Random Acts of Hesed* (well *Kindness*) saw the light of day. The book contains many stories about people who benefited from the kindness of strangers. The book is written from the point of view of the recipients. Yet, the book is meant to inspire us to do more acts of *hesed*. The editors of Conari Press wrote, and I edited it a bit ...

“[*Hesed*] is twice blessed. It blesses the one who gives it with a sense of his or her own capacity to love, and the person who receives it with a sense of the beneficence of the universe. [*Hesed*] heals us, because it reminds us of our oneness, allows us to see ourselves in one another's eyes, to remember that eyes themselves are a miracle, that seeing is a gift, and that the other, no matter who he or she may be, is, in one way or another, a perfect reflection of ourselves.”

I could not agree more. *Hesed* is indeed as transformative for the individual who performs it as it is for the recipient. *Hesed* builds community, no doubt about it, but more importantly, it transforms us into a more compassionate and caring community.

In the Talmud, (*BT Sukkah* 49b), Rabbi Eleazar teaches, *ein tzedakkah mishtalemet elah lefi hesed shebah*, the reward of *tzedakkah* depends entirely upon the extent of the *hesed* in it. Meaning that everything we do as Jews,

including *tzedakkah*, the highly regarded mitzvah of giving to others money and opportunities, is measured against how much *hesed* we put in it.

As much I love the book, in the light of our tradition's teachings, I want to suggest that the true title of the book is *Intentional Acts of Kindness*, because that is indeed the Jewish way. Ruth meant to show *hesed* towards Naomi and her family, there was nothing "random" about it. As individuals and as a community, we must be intentional as we incorporate the power of *hesed* into our daily lives.

As we begin our journey as congregation and rabbi, I pray that, inspired by our ancient matriarch Ruth, we will choose *hesed* when we meet each other, when we interact at meetings and programs, when we share life's ups and downs ... *Gomel hasadim tovim*, Divine Provider of lovingkindness, help us to live up to the daily challenge to show *hesed* to one another inside this sanctuary, in our classrooms, in our offices ... We pray, let Beth Torah be a congregation that does *hesed* the best! Let us feel the transformative power of *hesed*. May we be blessed to bring it into the community as well, because as we do so, will transform it and make it better than when we found it.

Shabbat shalom, may we be blessed with a Shabbat of peace and *hesed*.