

## Ask for Help

### **Kol Nidre Sermon 5780**

When 1<sup>st</sup> grade resumed in Pt. Dume last year after the fire, I'm not sure what we were hoping for our littlest one, David:

- A return to routine that might be good for a child following a month off school;
- A return to a familiar place might be comforting after moving around and being in a temporary 'home';
- Seeing other kids should be a relief, because the child was isolated from his classmates for so long;
- We thought he might find understanding, or camaraderie or something with his eight classmates who also lost their homes.

On the Monday morning following that first weekend after going back, at breakfast we found David stuffing two large freezer bags full of legos. These were legos that we'd bought thanks to so many generous helping hands on trip after trip to Target discovering what we needed, legos that strangers from Boston whose kids had insisted on helping out had sent to us, legos with which David had spent the last month since the fire trying almost non-stop to recreate all his lego projects that had been lost in the flames.

We asked him why he was putting those legos into a bag. He told us matter-of-factly that his friend Noah had also lost his house, and now Noah didn't have any legos because he hadn't gotten any new ones after the fire, so David was giving his to Noah.

Tamar and I shared this story on Facebook as a way of saying thank you to the countless people who helped us. I posted that this is the best example I've ever experienced of '*Mitzvah Goreret Mitzvah*' – one mitzvah leads to another, or, as David himself explained why he thought it was so important to help Noah, "Helping - It spreads."

As we look around our community here, we know there are so many examples of all of you who helped us, helped others in MJCS, and helped the wider Malibu community:

- defending homes,
- delivering caring phone calls and hugs and much needed laughs,
- giving clothes and toys and food and generous checks,
- providing therapy and organizing and sharing your expertise,
- You helped with a great selflessness, you helped with great spirit, you helped with tremendous resources, time, energy, compassion, and kindness...

Our tradition calls this kind of helping, this sense of actively being part of something greater than ourselves: *Col Yisrael Aravim Zeh B'Zeh* – all Israel are responsible for one another.

I'm proud to say that I serve a community that practices *Col Yisrael Aravim Zeh B'Zeh*. I'm proud to say our community is good at giving help.

### **But how good are we at asking for help?**

Like many of you here who lost homes in the fire or were exiled for any length of time, I found myself in a position to which I was unaccustomed and far less comfortable –being on the receiving end rather than the giving side, being the one who needs help, in a position to have to ask for help.

Most of us are eager to offer a helping hand - we feel good doing that! But we are far less willing to ask for the help we really need:

Likely there's been a time in your everyday life when:

- you were exhausted or stressed and just needed help running that errand or getting the kids on time;
- when you wanted someone to go with you to the doctor or walk you to your car at night or just to keep you company for the evening,
- when you've needed to borrow the right clothes or a place to stay or a home cooked meal;

- when you needed a ride to shul, a holiday meal, someone to sit with, someone to talk to...

Whatever help we need, we are often reluctant to ask for it.

And yet, the feeling of needing help is precisely what it is to feel human; it's what being really, fully, human is all about: We are in our essence creatures who are simultaneously both in need of help, and help givers.

We all know that God creates Adam, the first human being. The Torah tells us: There was Adam in the Garden of Eden, hadn't been there very long at all, and God already realizes "It is not good for the human to dwell alone." What does God do? God immediately says I will make for the human an עֵזֶר - "ezer" – a helper. Adam and Eve are created to help one another, to be helpmates for each other.

In other words, first and foremost, we are incomplete without the others to help us. At the same time, we are created to be the help for others. Helper and Helpee – that's us, that's being human.

Therefore, when we admit we need help, when we dare show we are only all too human and ask someone for that help we truly need, we give others the opportunity to be themselves, to respond, to have the joy of giving something that's really needed.

My wife Tamar recently told me about her friend Tzipi who underwent cancer treatment last year. People on her synagogue's caring committee provided meals ongoing for six months, did all the kid carpools, even took care of the garden. Her friend Miriam kept asking what she could do to help, but there was nothing else that Tzipi could think to ask for. Then Tzipi realized the one thing she wanted to do but was just too exhausted to take on, was to lift up a pen and write thank you notes to the hundreds of people who had helped. Miriam, who is a journalist, lit up. This was the help she could give, and she sprang into action, buying cards, taking Tzipi's dictation and editing her Israeli-in-America English.

Think how vital and purposeful it felt for you to help in whatever way you could after the fire: After the fire our distant cousins here kept asking what they could do to help...we finally figured out what we needed: A relaxing, family Shabbat dinner. They were as elated and appreciative of the opportunity as we were relieved and comforted by the food and family familiarity.

When we are too embarrassed, or shy, or whatever it is that prevents us from asking for the help we need, or if we put on a mask and show we are ok on our own even though we really aren't, the result is a passive way to discourage other people from seeking the help that they need.

In other words, when we create the illusion that we're all right, other people are lead to think that, "hey if so-and-so can do it on their own, then I should be able to handle it on my own too!" A person thinking this way is much less likely to ask for help. A vicious circle is created – Because you didn't ask for help, someone else was inhibited from asking, and from them still more were discouraged.

If you ask for help then, you help all of us break through the cycle that keeps us estranged from ourselves and from each other.

It's really interesting: MJCS has a caring committee with many people eager to help when called upon. The committee can bring bereavement meals or food for the fam when someone is ill, give rides to the doctor or to shul, visit if you're sick, or provide whatever help members of our community need. We have more people on the committee waiting to be asked to help, than we have had actual requests for help in the last year and half!

Remember that Adam and Eve were created as helpers for one another, because they both needed to be helped. Yet for many of us, our sense of who we are is focused only on one side of that duality, on the helper side: We volunteer, we build, we lend a hand. It's hard to let go of that positive side of our identity and the very legitimate and essential self-worth that comes with it. Maybe we're scared to show the other part of our self which is equally legitimate and – I would

suggest – just as essential for our self-worth: the side that needs עֲזָרָה – “Ezra” - needs help.

Asking for help exposes our vulnerability, exposes our complete and utter humanity. Illusions shattered, asking for help allows us to share our humanity, to be more truly and fully our whole selves. We are needy. When we let people in, when we let people respond to that true us, the authenticity allows relationships to deepen.

Finally, if we ever get up the nerve to ask for help we often say things like, “I hate to be a burden, but...” “I don’t want to take advantage”, “I’m sorry to have to ask you...” In a sense, what we are saying is that we think needing help is somehow something to apologize for, a weakness or a failure, that we fear others will think we are not worthy of their help, or that we are not loved enough, or valued enough, or cared about enough to be helped.

And yet needing help is the most natural thing in the world, being vulnerable like we all are is simply being human. Our worthiness is inherent in our humanity just as needing help is inherent in our humanity. We all deserve the love, and value, and care that we know is in any helping hand...and we know it is in the helping hand because we so often give that helping hand! Why would we think that someone helping us, in turn would think differently about us needing their help than we think about the other people who need our help?

Which brings me to Yom Kippur and what we are doing here together on this most holy day of the year. Now and for the next 23 hours or so, we are asking for help and helping one another:

Today is the most human day on the Jewish calendar:

- We stand together, all of us – family, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, strangers...
- We stand hungry - reduced to our essential self, our needy and limited self;

- We stand Together – helping each other confess and bear the day, our voices shared in pleas for forgiveness and atonement, we help one another create the melodies that move our hearts and let us get in touch with our souls,
- We'll mourn together in yizkor.
- We'll feel alone together amidst the crowd, and alone amidst the crowd we'll feel together

אֲשָׂא עֵינַי אֶל-הַהָרִים מֵאֵין יָבֹא עֲזָרִי? עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

*A song for ascents. I turn my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, maker of heaven and earth. Psalm 121*

On this holy day we ask God for help and each other: Knowing that we will help each one another be the sublime spirits in the down-to-earth human bodies that we all are: Asking for help and helping.

Gmar chatima tova!

[With thanks to inspiration from Rabbi Andi Berlin]