

## Rosh Hashanah Morning 2009

### Senator Edward Kennedy – How To Make A Difference

The year was 1978. Jessica Katz was a baby, languishing in a Russian hospital because of a problem called malabsorption. Her parents, Boris and Natalya, were Jewish refuseniks. Jessica's only hope for survival was to receive infant formula made in the US, which was not available in the Former Soviet Union.

One night the phone rang in the Katz's apartment. It was the KGB, telling Boris to meet them at midnight because an unnamed guest wanted to meet him. He did what he was told, fearful that this was a ploy to arrest him for some made up reason the secret police often came up with to imprison Jews. He arrived at the meeting and to his amazement, in walked Ted Kennedy.

Katz recalled "A bunch of KGB men came with Senator Kennedy into the room. He just turned around and told them to go away. This was clearly the first [time] ever I witnessed something like this. Here the all-powerful KGB men wanted to be at the meeting and the senator just told them to go away, and they looked at each other and just left. That was a powerful scene."

Kennedy told Boris he had spoken with Leonid Brezhnev, the leader of the Soviet Union, and convinced him to let the Boris's family come to the US so Jessica could have the proper treatment.

Within weeks, the Katz family landed at Logan airport. Who was the first one to greet them on the tarmac? Ted Kennedy. And his help did not end there. He got Boris a job at a computer software company. He would call them over the years to find out how they were doing.

Jessica Katz is now 31. She has devoted her life to finding housing for the poor in New York City. She chose this job because thanks to Ted Kennedy's inspiration, she believes in the power that each person has to change the lives of others.

The most important word in the Torah portion we read on this holy day is "hineni – here I am." This is Abraham's reply when God asks him to sacrifice Isaac. He says it to Isaac when he is frightened on their way up the mountain. It is Abraham's reply when the angel calls to him from the heavens. Our holy days are all about our willingness to put ourselves on the line, to take responsibility for making this world a better place, by being there for our families, our community, the stranger who needs our help.

After 47 years as our senator, Ted Kennedy may well hold the world record for the number of people whose lives one person saved or improved in some dramatic fashion. But he wasn't just there for the Jessica Katzes of the world who needed his help. He was a model of being there for his family, through more triumphs and tragedies than any of us will probably ever know. His impact on the world will be remembered in a way few others' will, because he spent his life saying "hineni" to anyone who needed his help. On this Rosh Hashanah when Abraham's courage is fresh in our minds, and Ted Kennedy's loss is still fresh in our hearts, we think about how his example is a powerful model of how we can make a real difference in the world.

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav wrote that each of us possesses *nkudot tovot*, little points of goodness, which we can harness to save the world. None of us is in the position to influence world leaders and fly halfway around the world to save the life of a child. But two small acts, each of which left an indelible impression on Ted Kennedy's sons, could have been done by any of us. At his funeral, Ted Kennedy Jr. talked about his fear of sledding down his icy driveway after he lost his leg to cancer. He said that his father explained to him that he had to face his fears in order to overcome them. He literally picked him up and placed him on the sled. This experience taught him to have courage and face obstacles head on with strength and determination.

Patrick Kennedy said that the up side of having asthma and terrible headaches when he was a child, was that he could have his father's undivided attention whenever he got sick. He remembers all the times his father would not leave his bedside while he was suffering. He will never forget the healing power of his father's presence.

No matter who we are, we can give another person the greatest gift of *hineni* with our presence and our attention. One of the questions I am most often asked is what a person should do or say when they go to a house of mourning. According to Jewish law, you are not to say anything. You are supposed to listen to the mourner and respond to their words. Encouragement, support, being present, paying attention – these are the *nkudot tovot*, the little dots of goodness all of us have, which can make a world of difference in the life of another.

Ted Kennedy will best be remembered as a powerful orator. His passion for his convictions made him one of the most effective senators in our history. But it was the words he used in his personal interactions which had the most powerful impact on others. As President Obama said in his eulogy, Kennedy "was the friend and colleague who was always the first to pick up the phone and say, "I'm sorry for

your loss," or "I hope you feel better," or "What can I do to help?" This was his genius as a successful legislator and friend – the personal touch of reaching out to others and showing that he cared.

We don't need to be a brilliant orator for our words to make a profound difference. Just by saying hineni – I am here for you, I care about you, shining our little ray of sunshine on someone who is experiencing the darkness of illness or loss or loneliness, we can have a powerful and lasting impact on others.

At a teacher's meeting the other week, Joan Perlman asked us to remember the best teachers we ever had and to figure out what made them so good. The common thread through all of our answers was that it was the teachers who took the time to reach out to us personally, whose words of encouragement showed us they genuinely cared.

Ted Kennedy was not a saint. But he was a deeply religious man. It was his values of fighting for the oppressed, the needy, the disabled, the immigrant, to fight for health care reform til the day he died, which drove him to say hineni to Jessica Katz and her family. But it was the little ways he lived out his values which made the biggest impact on his family.

Patrick Kennedy told the story of how he told his father that he had forgotten to take his money when they left a hotel room. His father replied that the people who clean the room have families to feed and how that money could be used to help those who are less fortunate. This taught Patrick the value of being sensitive to the needy and being considerate to people who helped him on a daily basis.

How many family stories do we have, of a parent, a grandparent, or other relative or friend, whose act of generosity made a lasting impression on us? We don't need to travel halfway around the world to make a difference. It's the little acts of goodness, the little ways we say hineni to those who could use a helping hand which have the biggest impact on our family and community.

Every year I learn about a grandparent who has helped encourage their child's connection with our temple and raise the next generation of Jews in their family by helping to pay for their grandchild's Jewish education. None of us would be sitting here right now if it wasn't for all the members of our community who say hineni to keep our temple functioning, both financially and by volunteering to take on responsibilities, both large and small.

We don't need to have the skills, the position or the resources of Ted Kennedy to make this world a better place, to be present for those who need us, to use our

words to support and encourage each other, to model the values which will not only help our world, but continue our legacy. But we are blessed to have the memory of his courage, his untiring insistence on being a force for good, even to his dying day, to inspire us to live up his model of selflessness and kindness.

Like Abraham, all we have to do is say “Hineni – here I am” when someone needs us, asks for our support, when we jump at the chance to do a mitzvah, when we take the initiative to help our Jewish community to grow and thrive and pass on our traditions to the next generation.

What will people say about us when the Day of Judgment is at hand? What will be said about us when our Book of Life is read? Not how much we had, but how much we did, not how much time we had, but how we affected the lives of others with the time we had. Thirty one years from now, will there be a Jessica Katz who is giving back to this world because of us? A child, a grandchild who is continuing their Jewish faith, a temple community that has survived, thrived, because we said hineni- here I am?

In Ted Kennedy’s words, “the work goes on, the hope still lives, and the dream never dies.” The Book of Life is open. As long as we continue God’s work in the world and are there to support each other, there is hope for all of us, and our dream of a better tomorrow will live on.