

Cha-yay Sarah 2015

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick November, 7 2015

You did not know my Dad, Fred Krupnick. I started here at Beth El in August of 1994 and he died less than four months later, a few weeks after his 63rd birthday. He was a wonderful, passionate, and complex person. The day before his funeral, I sat with my Mom and my brothers, and I asked them, "So what do we want people to know about Abbs; about the kind of person he was?" And my brother David said, "Let me tell you a story. One day, years ago, he and I were having lunch at the hoagie shop near the store. It was a very cold winter day and we were sitting near the window. We were both looking out the window when we saw a guy nearly slip and fall on the ice. Without missing a beat, Abbs took the saltshaker from the table, twisted off the top, went out without a coat on, and poured the salt on the icy spot. THAT's the kind of guy our father was."

He was so right. And that story has stuck with me- vivid in my mind ever since I first heard it. There is so much in that simple story of kindness, compassion and a willingness to step up and make a difference, even for someone you never met.

And I draw this story to your attention because this week we read one of the longest stories of the Torah, and at its heart it is a story with a very similar message. Abraham needs a son for Isaac so he deputizes his servant to go find one. The servant devises a test. I'll get to town thirsty and whoever comes up to me and says, "Let me give you water and water your camels, too," will be the right person to choose. Or as the servant says explicitly: "By this I will know that you have shown kindness [*chesed*] to my master." And of course that woman is Rebecca and she becomes a matriarch of our people. It's a simple story, yes, but the Torah goes into great detail in telling it. In fact, it is the longest chapter in the whole Torah.

And there are at least two important reasons that the Torah does so. The first reason the Torah goes into such great detail - and remember, these are among the earliest stories we tell about ourselves as a People - the reason for the exquisite detail is to emphasize the importance of *Chesed*, of kindness, even to strangers. In today's world - the secular world we live in as Americans - the watchword, the highest civic value is "Tolerance." We need to be able to tolerate each other - to live and let live. If you don't impinge on my life, and I don't impinge on yours, everyone will get along and the country will be a great place. Maybe so. But in the Torah world, in the Jewish world, in our religious outlook, tolerance is not enough. We are all in this together, and we need to look out for one another - not simply "tolerate" one another. That bridge that we build between one another - that Jewish ideal, is called *Chesed*.

Chesed, said the sages, is in some respects higher even than *tzedakah*: "Our masters taught: loving-kindness [*chesed*] is greater than charity [*tzedakah*] in three ways. Charity is done with one's money, while loving-kindness may be done with one's money or with one's person. Charity is done only to the poor, while loving-kindness may be given both to the poor and to the rich. Charity is given only to the living, while loving-kindness may be shown to the living and the dead." The more we talk about *Chesed* the more of it we bring into the world. And so the Torah, early on, highlights this as among our highest ideals. Small acts of kindness, often done anonymously, can have tremendous impact.

But the second reason I think the Torah goes into such detail in telling this story is that it wants us to understand how important it is to tell stories. Stories are among the most powerful teaching tools we have. That's what people remember. When you leave here today, of all the things I've said it is likely the story about my Dad and the saltshaker that you'll remember. So I urge you to tell stories. The stories that we choose to tell reflect a great deal about what we value most in our lives. Heschel said, "When I was young I admired clever people; but now it is kindness that I admire most." What is it that YOU admire most? What are the stories you choose to tell. If the stories we tell are about success in business, about material possessions, about sports, that shows what's on our minds and what we pay attention to... so pay attention to what you pay attention to by listening to your own stories.

Central to the Jewish mission is to bring more Chesed into the world, and we do that by sharing stories of Chesed that are happening all around us - every day. And the stories of Chesed that we choose to share need not be of famous people, or of celebrities. No, they are far more likely to be impactful and memorable if they are about ordinary people we know and are likely to see, or at least remember seeing. When we highlight Chesed we are going beyond mere "tolerance" to a deeper appreciation of one another, and, at the same time, we are revealing to others what matter most in the world through OUR eyes.

All of us carry around loads of stories, more than we could ever count. And what we choose to remember helps to define the people we are as well as where we have come from. But our stories also define US. So look for stories of Chesed to share. Make noticing them and retelling them a priority in your life, for in so doing we will make this world a better place, for ourselves and for those around us.