Dvar Torah - JFS AGM 2020
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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This past year has been filled with challenge and trial, in the midst of the pandemic, economic crisis, climate crisis, social strife and division, the continued rise of hate groups, those targeting Jews chief among them we have also experienced personal loss and tragedy.

So many who were with us this time last year are not alive to celebrate the holidays this year; families have been separated by closed borders and many of us feel isolated and alone.

In thinking about how to frame our meeting tonight, one word keeps coming to my mind, that word is empathy.

I am reminded of a story Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z'l told a story about the power of empathy: and I think it frames in so many ways the mission and the power of JFS.

Rabbi Sacks attributes the story to William Ury, founder of the Harvard Program of Negotiation,

"A young American, living in Japan to study aikido, was sitting one afternoon in a train in the suburbs of Tokyo. The carriage was half empty. There were some mothers with children, and elderly people going shopping.

Then at one of the stations, the doors opened, and a man staggered into the carriage, shouting, drunk, dirty, and aggressive. He started cursing the people, and lunged at a woman holding a baby. The blow hit her and sent her into the lap of an elderly couple. They jumped up and ran to the other end of the carriage. This angered the drunk, who went after them, grabbing a metal pole and trying to wrench it out of its socket. It was a dangerous situation, and the young student readied himself for a fight.

Before he could do so, however, a small, elderly man in his seventies, dressed in a kimono, shouted "Hey" to the drunk in a friendly manner. "Come here and talk to me." The drunk came over, as if in a trance. "Why should I talk to you?" he said. "What have you been drinking?" asked the old man. "Sake," he said, "and it's none of your business!"

"Oh that's wonderful," said the old man. "You see, I love sake too. Every night, me and my wife (she's 76, you know), we warm up a little bottle of sake and take it out into the garden and we sit on an old wooden bench. We watch the sun go down, and we look to see how our persimmon tree is doing. My great-grandfather planted that tree …"

As he continued talking, gradually the drunk's face began to soften and his fists slowly unclenched. "Yes," he said, "I love persimmons too." "And I'm sure," said the old man, smiling, "you have a wonderful wife."

“No,” replied the drunk. “My wife died.” Gently, he began to sob. “I don’t got no wife. I don’t got no home. I don’t got no job. I’m so ashamed of myself.” Tears rolled down his cheeks.

As the train arrived at the student’s stop and he was leaving the train, he heard the old man sighing sympathetically, “My, my. This is a difficult predicament indeed. Sit down here and tell me about it.” In the last glimpse he saw of them, the drunk was sitting with his head in the old man’s lap. The man was softly stroking his hair.

What he had sought to achieve by muscle, the old man had achieved with kind words.

A story like this illustrates the power of empathy, of seeing the world through someone else’s eyes, entering into their feelings, and of acting in such a way as to let them know that they are understood, that they are heard, that they matter.”

The Talmud (Shevuot 39a), in discussing the domino effect of sin, concludes with the Aramaic phrase, Kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh, meaning all of Israel are responsible for each other. This phrase is the basis of the notion of communal responsibility in Jewish law. If one Jew sees another Jew at the verge of sinning, he has an obligation to step in and help. Even more so, it implies an obligation on all Jews to ensure that other Jews have their basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter taken care of. Simply by virtue of being a Jew one is responsible for the well-being of other Jews, and vice versa.

Empathy and Obligation - the two values that have been the foundation of the jewish people and are at the core of the mission and work of JFS. They have never been more important and needed, not in my lifetime anyway than they are now. In the midst of all that we have been through, are going through and the uncertainty that is still to come.

JFS - sees the world through the eyes of those who are hurting and responds with compassion and care. Sometimes a shoulder to cry on, or a listening ear. Sometimes with the food or shelter a family needs to survive, and oftentimes with much much more.

We do this because we care, but we also do it because we are Jews, we are responsible for each other Kol yisrael arevim zeh bazeh, its a commandment not a suggestion. JFS is the way this incredible community lives those two fundamental Jeish values, Empathy and Obligation.

I am honoured to be your host tonight, to help share the good and important, life saving work that JFS is doing in our community and to add my voice to all of yours when I say how proud we are of staff and volunteers that work tirelessly so that everyone in our community who is crisis or in need knows that they are understood, that they are heard, that they matter; and that we care.