How Barry Manilow Saved My Life
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Did I ever tell you the story about the time Barry Manilow saved my life? Well, maybe to be more accurate it was my mother's life. In fact, I think after you hear the story you might conclude that he really saved both our lives, and that he could save yours as well.

Shortly after Passover this past spring, my mother ended up in ICU following complications from knee replacement surgery. After about a week in ICU, she was discharged to a skilled nursing facility to rehab her knee. While she was there, I sat with my dad and my siblings on rotation in her room, making sure she got the attention and care she needed.

During that time, my mother who has always loved Barry Manilow, and music of that genre requested that we play his songs to speed her recovery. We did, she would sing along, forcing me and my siblings, and my dad to sing along with her, as well as the nurses, the therapists and the care aides. It was Manilow Mania in her room. "Ready to Take a Chance Again", "Mandy", "Can't Smile Without You", on and on, I mean this is an artist who wrote a song about writing the songs that make the whole world sing; his lyrics and melodies are everywhere.

One morning we got an urgent call from the facility that they were rushing my mother back to the hospital, something was not right, her blood pressure and vital signs were critically low. Back in ICU they tried to figure out what was wrong as my mother rapidly began to decline. They discovered internal bleeding; they weren't sure she would survive the procedure to try to stop it. We had the conversations with the hospital social workers that I've had sitting by the side of many of you in this room, about heroic measures, potential outcomes and making plans for the unthinkable.

I prayed, I asked God for help.

I'm a pretty faithful person as you might expect for someone in my line of work but still I was like a nervous airplane passenger in turbulence; making all sorts of vows and promises to God if mom could just survive this harrowing experience. I'll tell you, I promised a few things then, that tonight on Kol Nidrei I needed to clear up and clarify with God.

As she was fading in and out of consciousness. My mother asked for more Barry Manilow music in her room. As though we weren't all already suffering enough?

In the midst of my prayers and my nervous pacing a thought occurred to me: maybe I could do better than playing "It's a Miracle" on my iPhone, maybe I could make a miracle happen?

When you're in that moment and I know many of us have been in that moment; feeling utterly helpless, unable to stop the oncoming train of destruction and heartache that you see barreling

headlong right at you; you want to do something; to do anything; to exercise some modicum of control over the senselessness, the chaos that exploded in your life in the space of a breath or a heartbeat.

Reb Moshe Leib of Sassov taught: “If you are looking for a spark, the best place to find it is in the ashes”. In the ruins of my utter despair and hopelessness I had the spark of an idea.
I began to wonder if I knew anybody who knew Barry Manilow and if I did could I ask them to ask him to record a message for my mother and lift her spirits; Heal her soul as her body continued to fail her?

From the ICU with tubes dripping and monitors buzzing and beeping I posted a message on Facebook and Twitter.

I’ve been a rabbi for 22 years in two different countries, sizable congregations, and communities. I’m fortunate and blessed to have many wonderful friends and a vast social network. My mother has also been a Hebrew school teacher and conversion tutor for more than 60 years; for much of my career, at least in the Jewish community, I was more frequently referred to as “Patti’s son”, instead of Rabbi Dan. Her good name and reputation always precedes me.

And so in this moment the internet did what it is really good at, maybe the exact opposite from what I discussed on Rosh Hashanah about how it is dividing us and inciting us against each other. Here the internet was a tool for connection, crowdsourcing, for bringing people together for a good cause and a kind purpose. Within a few hours I discovered that it turns out that I know five people that know or have some close connection to Barry Manilow and his team.

So the request was made, someone from his team actually called me, amazing!

“How do you know Barry?”

“Well, I don’t really, but my mom is very sick and she loves his music, could Barry record a short message to lift her spirits?”

They expressed sympathy for my mom and our family but explained they get thousands of these requests every year,

“Rabbi, consider Barry’s target demographic, aging bubbies and zaydes of every faith, I’m sorry but we can’t possibly say yes. I hope your mom gets better soon.”

CLICK

Pretty much what I expected, I tried.

Two yiddish words need to be spoken at this juncture in the story, *nudnik* and *chutzpah*.

You know that scene in the Blues Brothers where Jake and Elwood are in the midst of a car chase and Dan Akroyd's character Elwood says to Jake, "they're **not** going to stop us, we are on a mission from God"? I think there may have been a little bit of that at play amongst my social network, because after the fourth or fifth time my *chutzpadik* and *nudnick* friends and acquaintances called or texted Barry Manilow someone reachout out to get my cell phone. The next thing I know my phone rings with a Las Vegas number, I step out of the ICU, it's his assistant.

The call goes something like this:
"Is this Rabbi Dan?"

"Yes"

"Hi this is Matt, I'm Barry's personal assistant, how do you know Barry?"

"Hi Matt, well, I don't actually know Barry, but I think some of my friends and their friends do, you see my mom is in the hospital, she might die and the only thing that is keeping her spirits up, maybe even keeping her alive is Barry's music. I know it's a big ask, I know you get these all the time and if you say yes to me, you might never be able to say no again, but do you think Barry could record a get well video for my mom?"

"What's your mom's name? Is this your cellphone? We'll see what we can do."

Then Matt adds, "Rabbi Dan my dad has been sick too, I'm really sorry for what you're going through."

"Matt, I'm so sorry for you, hold on to every minute you have with him, say everything you have left unsaid, hang up on me and call your dad right now, tell him you love him, you can never say it too much, and at some point it will be too late."

We hung up. I cried for Matt's dad, I think he cried for my mom. There are no atheists in foxholes, or in airplane turbulence and there are no differences in grief and despair. If you know, you know.

So somehow, they found Barry Manilow backstage in Las Vegas in his dressing room just before he was about to go on for his show and he recorded a message for my mom.

Within 24 hours of hearing the message, doctors successfully stopped the bleeding. Mom's vital signs were slowly but steadily coming back into normal range and the doctors told us they expected her to not only live, which was seriously in question, but to make a full recovery.

Now, I'm a person of faith but as you've heard me describe before it's a fairly rational faith, the miracles that I believe in are human made. This was **that kind** of miracle, a whole bunch of

people, many who I didn't know but who related to the story, because we've all been there, by a bedside, feeling helpless wanting to do something. Coming together to help as best and as much as they could.

Why? Why did they do that? Why did friends of friends, who didn't know my mom, who might not have known me, why did they try to help, why did Barry Manilow stop whatever he was doing before going on stage for thousands of people and record a message for my mom?

You could say because Barry and Matt and all the people that tried to help are *menschin*. You'd be right, they are a mensch! But what really is a mensch?

There is a Jewish value at work here, in Hebrew it's called Gemilut Hasadim, acts that cause kindness. Our rabbis teach kindness is one of the three pillars upon which the whole world stands, Torah, Prayer and Acts that cause Kindness. Without kindness the world collapses.

When kindness is withheld, it can be brutal and soul crushing. But when kindness is given, kindness received - the rabbis were right it really is world sustaining. Gemilut Hasadim is the contagion of goodness. We know all too well, when contagions spread, they are practically unstoppable.

Our tradition teaches that kindness is more than just the acts; it's the emotion, the effort, the total human involvement for the other that motivates you to act. Kindness creates a bond between the giver and the receiver, It's not **about** you but it is, most certainly, **because** of you. That's what kindness does to you when you give it.

I am not suggesting this is somehow a uniquely Jewish trait, it's not, it's a human expression, perhaps the most fundamental and human of all, to help another person in their time of need, to be kind.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead reached the same conclusion as our rabbis who say kindness is one of the foundations of the whole world, "The earliest sign of civilization is not a clay pot, or tools made of iron, or the first domesticated plants. It is a mended femur. It shows someone must have cared for the injured person, hunted on their behalf, brought them food, served them at personal sacrifice. The first step to civilization is an act of human compassion, of kindness, and it becomes the foundation to all the great achievements of humankind."

Out of despair comes purpose. The purpose of the individual who is in despair, calling out for help, and our collective purpose in offering the kindness imbued in our response. Kindness changes you, improves you.

Sometimes our purpose to get up in the morning is indeed ourselves, but quite often it's our loving care and concern for others. It's that ancient cave dweller who went out and hunted and gathered a double portion so that their mate could rest and recover from the injury they

experienced. Why? Because in that cave and in this world, we need each other, everyone of us will experience a moment when we need help, we can't do it alone.

You know where I found this most? In my gratitude for what others did for my mother I wanted to pay it forward somehow, so I started to read GoFundMe posts and give some tzedakah. I like to make small contributions to people in need, it's just a thing I do.

If you want your heart broken and then mended, if you are uplifted by stories of true kindness, visit the GoFundMe website. You'll find there thousands of desperate pleas for help; along with them you will find tens of thousands of acts of kindness.

GoFundMe campaigns always sprout up after natural disasters and mass shootings. But people also raise money every day for funeral expenses, for animals, to pay for a wedding dress for a bride who lost her's in a fire, to make the home of a disabled veteran wheelchair accessible, the examples are as limitless as human suffering.

The level of support, the sheer numbers of people that step up to help reveals the fundamental kindness and goodness in humanity. And it reveals something else as well, our own need to redirect our sense of hopelessness and frustration with the state of the world toward a purpose greater than our own self interest. Maybe we can't solve the big problems that plague our society and our planet, but we can take that problem and solve it at a local level.

Restaurants suffering in COVID, we can help that neighborhood cafe.

Global warming causing unprecedented flooding in the interior, we can help one ranch rebuild their ruined stables and barn.

We think sometimes we should be able to do it for ourselves. Consumed with worry we don't want to bother others with our troubles, we can't imagine people will really care.

There is a beautiful story in the Talmud about a rabbi who selflessly goes around taking care of and in some cases even curing all these other people, and then he himself is sick.

And when they ask, Why can't he cure himself? The answer is, because the prisoner can't free himself from jail. And when you have bars in front of you, you need someone else to find the key, to reach in and pull you out.

Everyone has experienced a moment in life where somebody reached in and pulled you out, lifted you up, physically, emotionally, spiritually.

That act of reaching out, of lifting up it restored your faith in whatever, in humanity, in your relationship with that person, in God, in yourself as a person deserving of kindness. That is the power that one human being has in the life of another and then when you multiply that by

dozens and dozens of people all doing acts of kindness, it's the power to sustain the world, to change the world.

And you must know also that just as somebody has done that for you in your life, whether you realize it or not, whether they have told you this or not, you have done that for somebody and someone else's life, you have been that help they needed, that support they couldn't get by without, that guardian angel, and you appear to them in that moment to be heaven sent. Because you are. Menachem Mendel of Rymanov taught, "People are God's language that is why when we cry out in our anguish God responds by sending us people."

Part of the solution for any narrowness, depression, upset, tragedy is to make life bigger, because it is always bigger than what we can see. And doing that, like opening the aperture on a camera lens, when we widen our focus we are able to see beyond our narrow self, and thereby we enable ourselves not only to be changed, but to change.

STORY OF THE BOY AND THE BOULDER - *I'll just tell this in my own words but here is a manuscript version*

There once lived a man and his young son.

The man was a merchant, someone who sold a little of this and a little of that just to keep food on his family's table. Usually he sold his merchandise to his neighbors in the town in which he lived. But once each month he would bring out his sturdy wagon, load it with a little of this and a little of that, hitch his horse up and head off on a trip to sell his goods to the people living in other towns. And when he went on these trips, his son went along.

Now generally nothing very exciting happened on these trips, but to the boy they were always great adventures. That was because the town in which he and his family lived was nestled in a beautiful valley, surrounded by tall mountains. And to get to any other town you had to cross the mountains. And that was the adventure! For the only road out of the valley wound up and around the tallest of the mountains, and it was just barely wide enough for the horse and the sturdy wagon. And as the man and his young son rode up and around, they always had the mountain on one side of the road and a steep cliff on the other.

On this particular day, their trip started out like any other. Early in the morning, the father loaded his wagon with a little of this and a little of that. Then he hitched up the horse, he and his son climbed onto the wagon, and with a soft cluck of his tongue and a gentle shake of the reins, they were on their way.

All morning long they followed the only road out of the valley, as it wound up and around, and always they had the mountain on one side of the wagon and the cliff on the other.

It was almost noon when they came to the top of the mountain, where the road turned to begin winding back down the other side. The sun stood high overhead as they came around the last

bend. And there, at the very highest point, the horse suddenly stopped! The father and son looked ahead, and saw in front of them a huge boulder blocking the road. The horse had stopped because it didn't know what to do. If they had been on a road in the valley, it would have been a simple matter to pull off into a field and go around. But here, on this road, they couldn't go around, because they had the mountain on one side and the cliff on the other! It seemed as though they would have to go back.

But the boy turned and said quickly, "Don't worry father, I'll move that boulder and then we'll be on our way. The boy jumped down from the wagon and began to work. He pushed and he pulled at the boulder, but it wouldn't budge.

The boy walked wearily back to the wagon, wiping his arm across his forehead. He looked up and said, "I'm sorry dad, but I can't move that boulder, and we can't get around it. I'm afraid we'll have to go back."

His father looked down and asked, "Have you really done everything you could?"

Surprised by the question, the boy thought for a moment. Then his face lit up with inspiration, and he ran to the back of the wagon and got out a long piece of cloth, for they sold fabric. He went to the boulder, wrapped the cloth around it, took a deep breath, and began to pull. He pulled until his muscles bulged, but the rock didn't budge.

Disappointed, he walked back, slumped against the wagon, and said, "I'm sorry father, it's no use. We'll have to go back." His father tilted his head to one side as he looked at his son and asked again, "Have you really done everything you could?"

Though he was very tired, the boy thought for a moment. Suddenly, his shoulders straightened as an idea came to him. He ran to the back of the wagon and took out a long piece of wood, for they sold lumber. He went to the rock, placed one end of the board underneath it, and began to lean on the other end. He pushed down with all his weight, he pushed until his eyes bulged, but the rock didn't budge. He stared at the huge boulder for a moment more, then turned slowly and trudged back to the wagon. Once more he said: "I'm sorry father, I just can't move that rock. We'll have to go back." And once again his father looked at him and asked, "Have you really done everything you could?"

This time the boy got angry. "Yes! Yes I have! I have been pushing and pulling, I've used the cloth, I've used the lumber. I really have done everything I could!"

His father shook his head, smiled a loving smile and said quietly, "No, you haven't, because you haven't asked me to help you." With that he climbed down from the wagon, and then he and his son walked to the rock together, together they rolled it off the road and over the cliff. Then, together, they climbed onto the wagon, and with a soft cluck of the father's tongue and a gentle shake of the reins they were on their way.

If the most powerful human act is an act of kindness, then the companion to that action, equally powerful, is to ask for help. To ask and receive kindness is to have your prayer answers, in the language of God, by those of us in this community sitting beside and around you right now.

Tomorrow Temple Sholom will launch a new page on our website, “Give Kindness”.

There members of our community can ask for help. Faced with a seemingly unmovable boulder in your path you can anonymously post a need you have, ask for help. (Need a ride to the cemetery/services/doctor, need help moving, need a job, need someone to walk with, etc.). You post your needs, the boulders you don’t have the strength, courage, resources to overcome on your own and Temple Sholom members, all of us, creatively and cooperatively can respond directly with kindness, with offers of help and support.

Out of despair comes purpose, out of chessed, compassion and kindness towards others comes hope. It's one of the pillars of community, one of the pillars sustaining the whole world. This is a different kind of High Holy Day appeal, give kindness. It will help someone in need, it will give your own life purpose, it will sustain the world.

Imagine if your world was shattered and no one cared? What if you asked for help and no one answered? Some don’t need to imagine it, you’ve experienced it.

Our rabbis teach: “*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bah zeh*,” that all Jews are responsible for one another. The idea that we are all responsible for each other means that no one should ever have to feel alone, certainly not in a community such as ours. Being responsible for each other means that when we’re a part of a community and you ask for help, it's our responsibility to answer.

Ask for help when you need it, give help, give kindness whenever and however you can, in despair find purpose; and to paraphrase - remember what Barry sang, “if I only knew what you were going through, you’d know that I just can't smile without you.”

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