BLESSING TO THE HESED COMMITTEE
TEMPLE SHOLOM
June 12, 2015

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai – the rabbinic leader at the end of the second temple period was once walking with his disciple Rabbi Joshua near Jerusalem shortly after the destruction of the Temple.

Rabbi Joshua looked at the Temple ruins and said: "Whoa unto us! The place where we drew near to God through the ritual of animal sacrifice lies in ruins!"

Then Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai spoke to him these words of comfort: "Be not grieved, my son. There is another way now of drawing close to God even though the Temple is destroyed. We must approach God through *gemilut hasadim*, acts of lovingkindness, for it is written: For I desire *hesed*, not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6) (Avot d'Rabbi Natan 11a)

Rabbi Yohanan could have responded in a number of ways. He was the founder of the yeshivah at Yavneh, the center of study, that became the basis for the survival of Judaism once the Temple system was gone; he could have answered Rabbi Yohanan by saying, "Torah study, that is the way that we will connect to God and to another?" Or, as the organizer of a new system of Jewish leadership based on the authority of the rabbi, he could have promoted the power of the rabbi, versus the priest, as the new path; a Jewish Pope.

But instead he responded, "we must now draw near to God through *gemilut hasadim*."

Hasadim is the plural of "*hesed*." *Hesed* is one of the many Hebrew words for "love," but it does not mean "love" in the romantic sense or in the sense of love that one feels for a family member or a friend. The King James Bible – which I don't often quote created the English word "loving-kindness" to capture its meaning; others translate it as "loyalty." It is not an emotional state but a description of a certain kind of relational action.

The scholar Daniel Elazar writes that *hesed* is "the loving obligation resulting from a covenantal tie." He goes on to say that if brit, covenant, "creates a partnership, then *hesed* is what makes the partnership work." Gordon Freeman has described *hesed* as "reciprocity…a value that goes beyond the minimum utilitarian aspect of living together in society…Its purpose is to lead to greater cohesiveness between people." (Elazar and Freeman in Kinship and Consent: The Jewish Political Tradition and Its Contemporary Uses, ed. Daniel Elazar, 1983)

Rabbi Toba Spitzer taught that in this understanding, acts of *hesed*, of loving obligation, are what maintain a covenantal community; they are the means by which the members of such a community go beyond the narrow definitions of what it

means to be in such a partnership, in order to—in the words of Elazar—"make the relationship between them a truly viable one."

The actual practice of *gemilut hasadim* as summarized in my favorite passage form the Talmud, a prayer we recite every Shabbat morning in this sanctuary, Eli D'varim it's a list that was developed over time, and reflects the experience of Jewish communities caring for their members and for those in their midst over hundreds, even thousands of years. The classic list of obligatory acts of hesed includes hospitality to travelers and strangers, visiting and caring for the sick, providing for the poor, celebrating with bride and groom attending to the dead and comforting mourners.

So Rabbi Yohanan's teaching is that it is through such acts, acts that serve to bind us together in a web of mutuality, that we are able to connect not to just to one another but also to God/liness. Other rabbinic texts teach that we are in fact modeling God's actions when we do *gemilut chasadim*: that in the Torah we see ways in which God clothed the naked, visited the sick, buried the dead, and so we are called to enact Godliness as well.

Gemilut hasadim, understood in this way, is not just a practical means for ensuring a close-knit community. It is also a spiritual practice, a way to transform ourselves even as we touch the lives of others.

Our Hesed Group are teaching each of us a new way to pray and draw nearer to God, not through word, but through deeds, deed of loving kindness. You bless us with the work of your hands, your heart, your compassionate and empathic souls.

So tonight, as we your Klay Kodesh bless you, we must affirm first and foremost that it is you who bless us, all of us. You are the blessing, you are the conduit that draws use together as a community and draws each of us nearer to God and Godliness.

[Priestly Blessing]