Pay It Forward
Rosh Hashana 5761

My Dad taught me among many things how to throw a curve ball. My mom taught me how to handle the curve balls life throws at you. I had a teacher in High School who taught me how to build and create things out of wood. I had a professor in college who built in me a social conscience, and awareness of the most overlooked in our society. I was blessed with a thesis advisor in rabbinical school who showed me insights into the Torah and Jewish tradition in ways I never would have uncovered on my own. Everyday, even when we don't see eye to eye, my wife reminds me of the power of love, how to give it and how to receive it.

We have all had so many teachers in our life, some by profession and title and others by the way they cared for us and the interest and involvement they showed us. We are forever in debt to those who have helped us become the people we are today. Think for a moment of your teachers, think of those whose kindness and guidance have been an inspiration to you, have empowered you to hold the positions, the possessions, the principles, the partnership, the perspective on life that you so cherish and value today. If they asked you to, how would you pay them back for what they have given you? How would you give them back what they have given you?

When we think about it, we can identify the source of every blessing we have received in life. When we really think about it, we can attach names and places, dates and events to all that we hold to be so intrinsically part of who we are. When we think about it we realize just how much we owe others.

For some of us those attributes, those abilities, those insights into life came from people who we now mourn and say kaddish for. How do we pay them back, how do we

let them know just how much their lessons taught us, their lives shaped ours? There is only one currency that spans the divide between this world and the next and that is to be for those who come after us, what those who came before us were for us. For those living and those whose memory lives on, the greatest honor we can pay them, is not to pay them back for their kindness, their instruction, their inspiration, but to Pay It Forward to someone else. To take the blessings we have known in life, those that we now enjoy in abundance and to pay them forward to someone else, to pass them along so that others might know the blessings that we so cherish in life.

I think on some level I always knew this idea of paying it forward to be true, but I didn't fully understand its power and potential until I read a book this summer that shared its title with the idea, 'Pay It Forward'. The film by the same title will be released later this month, and our synagogue will host a screening, but the lessons that can be learned from this story are important for us today, right now, before another day passes and another opportunity is missed.

It is not unusual for a Rabbi to talk about a movie in a sermon, like Shakespeare was freely quoted in his day, films and television shows are the lingua franca, the common language and reference point of our day. What is unusual is to talk about a movie before it has been released, perhaps before any of you have even heard of it. But I am going to do just that, because its message is so important, its idea so crystallizes what Judaism is working towards, what our challenge is on this High Holy Days, in this new year.

The film, 'Pay It Forward' is based on a book by Cathrine Ryan Hyde and it is about a boy who set out to change the world, one good deed, one mitzvah at a time. The

basic premises of this story, which I hope, and I think will become a blockbuster, is itself a blockbuster of an idea. The main character is a twelve year old boy named Trevor. Trevor and his entire social studies class are given an extra credit assignment, their assignment, come up with a plan to change the world for the better. While many of his classmates laugh off the assignment, and a few embark upon small recycling projects and cleaning up local parks, Trevor dreams bigger. He dreams on the scale of the Torah and Jewish tradition, he dreams of world change, of a revolution in how we treat and interact with one another. Trevor dreams of a way to pay forward all that we have been blessed by others within life. That in itself would be a terrific sermon, a young boy who wants to make the world a better place, but what makes this story and Trevor so inspirational and important is that he allows his dreams to lead him to action, he sets out to change the world three people at a time, and in the story he succeeds.

While Trevor and his plan are the work of fiction, we have an opportunity and I think an obligation to realize his dream in this New Year. Trevor proposes that instead of paying someone **back** for a kindness that they have done for you, an opportunity they have given you, a skill they have taught you, you pay it forward to three other people. Doing for those three people, something big, something life changing, something empowering, something they could not do for themselves. In his own words he explains, if you have a lot of something then give some of that to someone else. And he is not only talking about money. If you have a lot of work around your home or your business, hire someone who is out of work to do it. If you have a broken down car sitting in your driveway, fix it up and give it to someone who doesn't have one. If its professional skills, then teach those to someone who needs them, if its love you have in ample supply

then let that be your gift. Trevor's challenge, his mission, his goal is to actually change three people's lives in a lasting way. Again that in itself would be an important message for a sermon, but Trevor takes it to still another level of blessing, another level of paying it forward.

Those three people whom you have helped and empowered, they likewise cannot pay you back for your kindness, but instead, are challenged to pay it forward to another three. Trevor imagines that if his plan is put into action, in a matter of months the entire world will have done a good deed for someone else and have one done for them, at that point, the system keeps expanding exponentially and you have people who are getting paid forward a second and third time. And then believe it or not, you have what Judaism calls the messianic age, the redemption of the world.

In the catch phrases of Jewish tradition we call this idea *Tikkun Olam*, and it is based on the notion that that human beings are partners with God in the work of creation, that we have the power to make lasting change for the better to the world we live in. Perhaps we can't repair the world and all who are in it, in one big moment, but we can begin the process, we can repair the world piece, by broken piece, one person at a time, one to another.

The idea is so simple, we learned it when we were kids, when we believed in little boys changing the world, when believed that anything was possible if we only set our minds to it. It is what our parents always taught us, but we often forget, it is what our tradition reminds us of today and everyday, *mitzvah gareret mitzvah*, one good deed leads to another, we think that it is the stuff of fantasy, the idealistic view of the unenlightened. But it if you have ever had your wallet or briefcase returned by a stranger when you

thought it was lost forever. If you have ever been shown an unexpected kindness by someone you didn't even know, if you have ever seen on the news or in person, people rushing into a burning car, crawling through a collapsed building, leaping into a storm wash to save a drowning person, then you know as I know, as Trevor knows, that it is possible, kindness can beget kindness, all that stands in the way is ourselves.

Of course we are a mighty big obstacle to a perfect world. It is one thing to pay someone back for a kindness shown to us, it is wholly another to see that kindness as an opportunity to help someone else, to actually seek out those who could benefit from the abundance and blessing we so enjoy in life. Think of all the times that human beings have tried to improve the world, tried to make lasting change from the ground up, and all the times we have failed. In my life time I have witnessed, concerts to feed the world, comedy shows to relieve homelessness, telethons to cure almost every disease imaginable, and while they have all been admirable efforts and they have all made a difference in their own way, people still go to bed hungry, there are still homeless on our streets, curable or treatable diseases still go uncured, or under treated. If we were to count up all the failed attempts to fix the world we live in, we might conclude that it is beyond fixing, maybe some of us already have.

Except Judaism says that the world can be made better, we can fix what is wrong, we can make lasting change in our lives and in the lives of those we touch. In fact every prayer that we have said in this service, every song that we have sung, every reading that we have read, has been toward that end. Judaism is an idealistic faith, we actually believe, no belief is not even a strong enough term, Judaism is actually trying to create a perfect world, to bring about the messianic age. A time when there will no longer be war,

famine, homelessness, to bring about a time when we will finally see each other as being created *betzelem elohim*, in God's image and treat each other, Jew and Gentile, man and woman, those of every nationality and ethnicity as the very embodiment of God's work. It is at that time, when we have achieved all that, that our tradition holds, that a leader will arise from amongst the people, not a God, or a son of God, but a human being, perhaps any one of us and lead the world to still greater heights and accomplishments, that is the messiah Judaism believes in, and is working to bring to the world, it is the messiah in each of us. It is that notion that any one of us can bring about lasting change in the world if we only made the effort.

The question though on these High Holy Days, particularly this Rosh Hashana with its added sanctity of falling on Shabbat, a time when we are suppose to envision the world we would like to create; the question is while our religion might be working toward perfecting the world, <u>are we?</u> Are we trying to bring about lasting change, to create that society that we all dream about; are we trying to change the world for the better? Because, I got news for all of us, that's what we have been praying about all this time, that's what we've been saying. That's what God expects us to be doing with our time here on earth, making this a better place for each other and those who will come after us. There is no greater purpose in life, there is no more central practice in Judaism. Our's is a religion and a way of life firmly rooted in the idea that to pay God back for the gift of the world, of the Torah, the blessings of family, health, happiness and love we must pay those same blessings forward to others. This is our covenant; this is our *brit* with God. We read in the Talmud, "The love of parents goes to their children, but the love of these children goes to their children" (Sota 49a). We can't pay God back for

giving us the Torah and its guidance in life; we can only pay that blessing and insight forward to others. In doing so we honor ourselves, we honor our teachers, and we honor God.

In a few moments we will stand and recite the Aleynu prayer. We will rise and face the ark, its doors wide open, we will bow at the knees in reverence and in supplication and we will in the words of that prayer acknowledge that it is our unique task, our special blessing, as Jews, as individuals, as people of faith to help bring about a better world. We will stand, we will bow and we will say, "Eternal God we face the coming day with hope made stronger by the vision of Your deliverance, a world where poverty and war are banished, where injustice and hate are gone. Teach us more and more to respond to the pain of others, to heed Your call for justice, that we may bring nearer the day when all the world shall be one. *B'yom ha ho, yehi adonai echad.* On that day, O God You shall be One and all shall come to know you as One."

Ok, maybe it is too much to ask, maybe it is insane, maybe this is just a dream, the stuff of Hollywood and fiction. Trevor was asked the same question, isin't this an insane idea that you think you can change the world? He said quite correctly, "If nothing changes, nothing changes. If you always do what you always did, then you'll always get what you always got. Insanity is doing the same thing over and over, and everytime expecting a different result."

We are insane. We keep doing the same things over and over hoping for different results. We have to be courageous, have faith and challenge ourselves to do something different. I believe in a world that can be better, and I am no longer willing to wait around for it to happen. I pledge on this new year to change three peoples lives in a

lasting way, I do so with the hope and intention that those three people will not pay me back, but will pay it forward to another three. I make this promise not as a rabbi, not as a Jew, but as a human being who believes that the world can be made better, three people at a time, if we all try and make it so. Join me in this promise, look closely at all you have been blessed with, all that you are thankful for, and Pay It Forward to someone else.