Pay It Forward

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5761
Rabbi Daniel J. Moskovitz
Temple Judea, Tarzana, CA

I am a messianic Jew. That may surprise many of you, most notably my father who sits somewhere over there. But it was meant to surprise you, more than that it is not only true about me, but if you believe that the world can be made better, if you committed to that ideal, not only in faith but by your actions and interactions in life, then you are one as well. We are all messianic Jews, or at the very least we all should be.

I am not referring to the Jews for Jesus types; I am not speaking about finding proof of Christian Messianism in the Torah. The proof does not exist, you cannot be a Jew and believe in Jesus, such conjecture is a fallacy and a dangerous misrepresentation and does a grave disservice to both Judaism and Christianity.

But to be a Jew, reform, conservative, orthodox, or undecided does mean to believe in the possibility, the potential of a messianic age; an era, a moment in history when all will be right with the world. When war, famine, ignorance, bigotry, and senseless hatred will forever be eradicated, a time when the people of the world will work together to come together instead of fall apart. The messianic age, this great era of peace and brotherhood has not happened yet, but to be a Jew, any kind of Jew, means to be working tirelessly, unceasingly, religiously toward that end. To be a Jew means that you believe that the world can be made not only better but, *im yertza hashem*, with God's help, and everyone's help, it can happen in our life time. I believe that with all my heart, with all my soul and with all my might, only belief will only get us so far; to make the world a better place is going to take action as well.

The most popular TV show in the country this past year was The West Wing. It's an idealistic depiction of life in the White House, the human side of politics and presidents. It is by no means an accurate reflection of life at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, some of what goes on there you still can't show on TV, but the fact that it depicts a government and a leader, President Josiah Bartlett as we all wish they would govern and lead is undoubtedly why much of the nation religiously plop's itself down on sofas on Wednesdays nights to tune in, and to tune out.

We tune in to a vision of our nation and our leadership that really works, which embodies the American dream. A leader that is a model of responsibility, integrity and compassion. Not conservative compassion, or liberal compassion, just plain old compassion, the kind that helps people when they are down, that cares for those who cannot care for themselves, that fights the battles that we all agree government should and needs to be fighting, The West Wing depicts the America of our dreams, the America of the messianic age.

But to be a fan of The West Wing, to watch the show one must also tune out, tune out the reality of our present day political process and environment, which, Joseph Lieberman aside has become far less inspiring, far more mired in the infighting and partisanship that has colored political debate in this country for the past few years.

TIME magazine observed that most of the people who watch The West Wing, leave the show at the end of the hour wishing that it was true, wishing that our leaders and our process were as good intentioned as the TV show portrays. I watch West Wing and I dream of a nation and a president that actually worked that way, that stood not for what was politically right, or morally convenient; but a nation that was struggling to do what was right, to embody what is good, a nation that wants to be perfect and will stop at nothing till it is.

We watch The West Wing and in our minds eye we see all that can be right with America, we hear bands playing patriotic tunes on lazy summer days, we see public pavilions filled with different ethnicities and cultures, we see neighbors and neighborhoods coming together to help one another in times of crisis and to celebrate in times of national joy. We see our nation as we wish it were, as we know it should be, and then reality sets in and we realize that it isn't, and maybe we think that it can't be. That what has so inspired us is only a TV show, it is only fiction and it will never be reality. We turn the channel.

The most popular book in our country is actually a series of books by J.K. Rowlings featuring Harry Potter and his young band of sorcerers and magicians, from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft. Harry and his friends live in an alternative reality where people who don't practice witchcraft are called muggles, and it is the muggles, those

without magical powers that are missing out, whose narrow view of the world and what it might become limits the great possibilities that life has to offer.

Rowlings' trilogy depicts a world where good always conquers evil, where children are respected for their opinions, their insights and their contribution to society. The world of Harry Potter exists as a world within a world, though ordinary people, muggles, are unaware of it. Harry learns that success is not about abilities, or your *yichus,* family lineage, it is about the choices you make in life, what you do with the abilities you are blessed with, the things you stand for and try to be. The challenge to Harry and all his friends at Hogwarts is how to take the very best from their magical world and introduce it into the real world we all live in. If they can, if they can practice their magic openly in the streets and cities, using their powers for the betterment of people and society then there is a chance that they may forever change the world, make it as good, as fair, as just as we could previously only dream. For Harry that is what life is all about, using his magical powers, his mystically given abilities to make the world better for everyone in it.

We face the same challenge that Harry faces in his grand adventures, that President Bartlet is struggling to meat in the America of The West Wing, except we can't rely on sorcery and magic to accomplish our goal, we don't have the luxury of our nations problems being solved before the next commercial, we must rely up ourselves, we must rely upon each other.

The most popular film in our country is a film that actually has not been released yet, but its message is so important, its story so compelling, that it will undoubtedly be a blockbuster, as it contains with in it a blockbuster of an idea, a vision of the messianic age, and a way to bring it about.

Catherine Ryan Hyde bases the film; 'Pay It Forward' on a book and it is about a boy who set out to change the world, one good deed, one mitzvah at a time. 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 each other. Trevor dreams of a way to pay forward all that we have been blessed by others with in life.

While Trevor and his plan, like Harry Potter and The West Wing are the work of fiction, we have an opportunity and I think an obligation to make his dream a reality 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, he's talking about gifts much more valuable than money. In the book Trevor takes care of an elderly neighbor's garden, she then pays his kindness forward by helping out others in the community. We can all think of things we can do for others, and maybe we can all think of people in our lives that can use our help. The janitor at our child's school who needs new tools from our old ones, the groundskeeper at our office building who could use some extra work on the side, the elderly woman on our street who would just like someone to talk with once in a while, the homeless person we pass everyday as we exit the freeway, that needs so much more than he has, some of what we are blessed with.

Trevor's challenge, his mission, his goal is to actually change three people's lives in a lasting way. 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, *mitzvah gareret mitzvah*, one good deed leads to another, we think that it is the stuff of fantasy, the idealistic view of the Harry Potter's and Trevor's of the world. 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, as Harry knows that it is possible, kindness can beget kindness, all that stands in the way is ourselves.

The question though on these High Holy Days, particularly this Rosh Hashanah with its added sanctity of falling on Shabbat, a time when we are suppose to dream of 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, and maybe this is just a dream, the stuff of Hollywood and fiction. Trevor was asked the same question, isn'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 every time 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. At the end of this service you are going to be given a button, it says quite simply, don't pay it back, pay it forward. Wearing the button will be easy, living our lives as the button suggests is the hard part, but I have faith in each of you, perhaps more so because you see the world as Trevor sees it, you read Harry Potter and dream as we all do, what if this was real. Let us make our dreams a reality; let us repair the world together.

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 only try. 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.