Pay It Forward
Rosh Hashana 5761
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

I am a messianic Jew. That may surprise many of you, most notably my mother 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, that 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 was, 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 novel in our nation is 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.

In many ways The West Wing and Harry Potter are windows looking out on a messianic age, depictions of how the world could be if we were all working together to make it a better place. President Josiah Bartlet and his West Wing staff use the power of democracy and the American ideal to create such a world, Harry Potter uses magic, and sorcerey and witchcraft, to accomplish many of the same goals. And yet we turn off the TV, we close the book and reality sets in and we are reminded that we don't live in those worlds, things just don't work like that here.

Except Judaism says that the world can be like those of Harry Potter and The West Wing, we can create the ideal, and 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, 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.

The question though on these High Holy Days, 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 when we watch shows like The West Wing and read books likes Harry Potter. 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.

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."

Could there be a more definitive statement from our tradition of what the purpose to life is, what our purpose here on earth is? I don't think so; our task is to leave this

world better than we found it and to do so not only in small ways with our families and our friends, but to do so in big ways as well, to make massive change on a massive scale. The prayers don't just talk about making peace in our homes, though we need to make peace there as well. They don't just talk about removing the hatred in our own hearts, thought that is where we must start. They don't just talk solely about feeding out families, though we need to provide for them as well. They are prayers on a much larger scale, seeking much larger change, making peace throughout the world, ending racism and bigotry at home and in our communities. It is not enough to simply give charity in the hope that it will make a difference; we must give of our money and more importantly ourselves, until it does make a lasting difference. That is what the Aleynu is all about; that is the messianic age; that is what it means to be a Jew.

It is not unusual for a Rabbi to talk about a movie in a sermon, like Shakespeare was 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 release, 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, based on a book by Cathrine Ryan Hyde, is called 'Pay It Forward', and it is about a boy who set out to change the world, one good deed, and 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 helping out around the house. Trevor dreams bigger, he dreams on the scale of the Torah and Jewish tradition, he dreams on the scale of the words we have said here today, of the ideal we so loved in Harry Potter and The West Wing, he dreams of a messianic age.

Trevor's plan is a plan for all of us, he proposes that instead of paying someone **back** for a kindness that they have done you, you pay it forward to three other people. Doing for those three people, something big, and 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 love that you have in ample supply, then let that be your gift, if its professional skills, then teach those to someone who needs them. Actually change three people's lives in a lasting way. Those three people are then obligated not to pay you back for your kindness and effort, but to pay it forward to another three. Trevor imagines that if his plan is put into action quite quickly the entire world will have done a good deed for someone else and have one done to 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 you know what you get, you get Harry Potter, you get The West Wing, you get a messianic age, we start living in that world that we only dreamed was possible, and from that point forward nothing becomes impossible

In the catch phrases of Jewish tradition we call this idea *Tikkun Olam*, and it is based on the notion that to save one life, is to save the entire world. The idea is so

simple, it is something that we learned when we were kids, when we believed in little boys changing the world, when believed that anything including magic and sorcery was possible, it is what our parents always told us, it is what our tradition reminds us of today, *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, as the author of the Aleynu knows that it is possible, all that stands in our way is ourselves.

I am a messianic Jew, 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 they 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.