Paying It Forward All Over Again

In a grocery store in the Midwest works a young grocery bagger named Johnny. Johnny has downs syndrome and lives at home with his parents. As the story goes, one day a supervisor for the grocery chain came to store and led a seminar on how important it was for their employees to put their personal signature into their work. The supervisor gave examples of airplane pilots who have written thank you notes to their passengers, a graphic artist that encloses a piece of sugar-less gum with every letter he sends so his customers will read his mail. The supervisor did not get specific about what the grocery employees should do to put a personal touch on their work, but he challenged them to do something. Privately the supervisor admitted that he had given this talk a dozen times in at least a dozen different grocery stores in his region and not one single employee had ever done anything. That was until he met Johnny.

Johnny went home that very day and asked his dad to teach him how to use the computer, they set up a program with three

columns, and each night after work he would come home and type in a thought for the day. Johnny explained that when he couldn't find a thought he liked, he would sit there at the computer until he thought one up, sometimes it would take him almost and hour to come up with one he liked. But every night before he went to bed he would print out multiple copies of his sheet of thoughts for the day and cut them into little slips of paper, kind of like the slips of paper you get from a fortune cookie, he would then carefully sign the back of each slip. The next morning Johnny would take the slips with him to work and as he bagged groceries for the customers he would place one of the slips of paper in each bag.

The following week the manager of the grocery store was walking the floor and noticed that Johnny's checkout line was three times longer than all the others. The manager, just went ballistic, this couldn't be allowed to happen, if people didn't get through the line quickly they would, just leave and shop someplace else. He was always very strict with his checkers and baggers to make sure they worked fast and efficiently, but apparently

Johnny's line was slowing the who thing up. He got on the PA system and called for all back up checkers and baggers to come immediately to the front. But as he was doing it he realized that all the checkers and baggers were already standing at their stations, only no one was waiting in their lines. It was at this same moment that the customers in Johnny's line rushed up to him and exclaimed, "No, No we want to be in Johnny's line, we want the thought for the day, we don't mind the wait at all."

Al shlosha d'varim ha olam omed, al haTorah al haAvodah, valGimmilut Hasadim. Upon three things the words stands proclaims Rabbi Shimon the Tazdeek, on Study, Prayer and acts of loving kindness. When was the last time you performed an act of loving kindness? When was the last time you did something nice, not out of compulsion to pay them back for a kindness, but just because it's the kind of person you hold yourself up to be.

Nearly a year ago, I stood on this pulpit during the High Holy Days and spoke about the concept of Paying It Forward. You may remember the sermon, if not that's okay too, my mom will email

you a copy. Quite simply it was about not paying someone back for a kindness they show you, but paying that kindness forward to someone else. It was about taking personal responsibility for Tikkun Olam and repairing the brokenness in our world one or three people at a time. I thought tonight, we could all check in with how we are doing in the pay it forward department. Have we shown others the kindness that has been shown to us. Have we left our mark in a positive and compassionate way on the lives of the people we interact with everyday. Not just our family and friends, but our co-workers, our classmates, the people we depend on for our dry-cleaning, our housekeeping, those that check and bag our groceries?

Our tradition teaches that during the month of Elul, the month preceeding the High Holy Days we are to perform Heshbone haNefesh, the throughout examination of our soul to determine, how we have faired in the past year. Have been just, righteous and generious with others? We are commanded to spend the months leading up to the High Holy Days in reflection and

contemplation. Not only on the past year or the year ahead as we are often reminded in High Holy Day sermons but also on the state of our soul, or *neshamah* right now. While their is still time to make adjustments and resolutions before the year is out and the *sefer haHayim*, the book of life is sealed. We often think that such an examination and evaluation of ourselves is reserved for those hot days in September as we sit in Yom Kippur services, our stomachs growling as the day slowly wears on till night time and relief from the prayers acknowledging our failings and seeking forgiveness.

But as with some many things so with Hesbone HaNefesh there is no better time than the present, examine where we stand in relation to the kind of person we hoped to be this year, have we paid forward as much kindness as we have received, have we given even more than that? The high holy days stand just three months off in the distance, its the time of year that rabbis start thinking of sermons, temple

start making arrangements and my mother starts cooking for break the fast. Let is also be the time that we examine the balance sheet of our Pay It Forward account.

I love the story about Johnny and the lines of people that wait extra minutes for his thought for the day, his note of kindness. But what would make the story truly wonderful would be if each of those people standing in line not only took the thought into their hearts, but put into the work of their hands as well. Imagine a world where people lined up, not only to receive kindness, but to do it as well.