

“A Methodist Mitzvah”

September 8, 2017/ 17 Elul 5777

Remarks at all-school Kabbalat Shabbat
CJDS Head of School, Dr. Tali Zelkowitz

Hinei ma tov u'ma'naim, shevet achim gam yachad. How wonderful it is for us all to sit together as sisters and brothers.

Thank you Pastor Frank Luchsinger. Thank you to all of you, our dear friends at the New Albany United Methodist Church.

But please know that this is no ordinary thank you.

This is a thank you for a *Methodist* Mitzvah. And let me tell you, Methodists know mitzvot.

Indeed, I have the extraordinary privilege of thanking you all, our dear friends and neighbors at the New Albany United Methodist Church for something that runs far deeper than a single act, or “gesture.” The kindness, or *chesed*, that they extend to us is part of the longstanding relationship of trust and mutual caring. Beyond opening their parking lot to us for overflow events (like this one!), they have also opened their doors to us as our safe evacuation site. So they have seen and felt, first hand, what it is like to be targeted for no reason, other than being different; and different from whose norm exactly?

It would have been easy to focus only on their own lives and concerns. But that is not what Pastor Frank and his community did. Ours was not a pain they allowed themselves to ignore. They felt compelled **to love their neighbor as themselves**. And this is what we are thanking you and your whole Church community for today: for the mitzvah of Vayikra/Leviticus 19:18, of: V’ahavta L’ra’echa Kamocha, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. This is often referred to in Jewish tradition as “the basic principle in the Torah,” (*klal gadol b’Torah*) but it must not be so basic or simple at all, if it is so widely disregarded.

And yet, two weeks ago, Pastor Frank, you and your church’s whole Staff walked over to CJDS completely unprompted and unsolicited, to tell us that you could not stand idly by, and that the events in Charlottesville moved you to act, and your whole community had quickly decided that your action was to deliver a beautiful binder filled with so many blessings and letters of support and solidarity that all said, in different ways, and in different colors, “we stand by you and we stand with you.” And more than a few letters even said, “we love you.”

All 15 or so of us stood in Ms. AG’s office, and as you described what you were giving us, Jenny and Rachel and I began to cry a very powerful kind of tears. They are the tears of someone whose People and even personal family members think twice about wearing t-shirts out with Jewish symbols and Jewish words. They are the tears of people who are conscious and self-

conscious about declaring publicly who they are. The tears of people who grew up being told, “Shh, keep quiet, don’t rock the boat. *Sha Shtil.*” They are the tears of people who have known persecution, discrimination, oppression, only too recently. These were our tears and the tears of many others – if not *every other* person in this room - when they heard about your Methodist Mitzvah.

We, who send our children to a Jewish day school want to know they will be safe. We want them to be safe as they learn how to be active and creative contributors to a better world. So instead of fear that Jews too often live with, what you have all given us in its place is love, trust, and safety. The tears we cry at the hands of your mitzvah are tears of healing.

There is also a story behind my own personal tears of healing that I don’t usually share publicly. But the story teaches us where a mitzvah like yours can ultimately lead.

I am the grandchild of 4 Holocaust survivors. I would not be here were it not for one convent in the south of France that **loved their neighbors as themselves**. In 1942, my maternal grandmother was one of 5 girls taken in at the convent. By the end of the war, there were 62 girls, saved and cared for by a nun named, Soeur Jeanne Françoise. She gave them extra potatoes and matzah during Pesach so they would not have to eat bread, and the girls taught her Yiddish songs. I would not be here, nor would my mother, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, my children... were it not for this nun and the Mother Superior, Mère Antoinette, who took the girls in.

Decades later, I got to meet this remarkable woman who saved me and my family, because the original 5 girls were able to make this nun’s life-long dream to visit Israel a reality, and they honored her as a Righteous Gentile in a ceremony the Yad Vashem Memorial museum in Jerusalem. I happened to be living in Jerusalem at the time and stood in my grandmother’s place at the ceremony. Soeur Jeanne was asked the same question we all asked Pastor Frank and his congregation today: How did this come about? Why did you do it?

And she gave the very same answer that all of you did:

How could we not?

We just couldn’t fathom ignoring the needs of our neighbors.

In a letter Soeur Jeanne sent to my grandmother not long before her death, on March 8, 1994, she wrote,

“I was spoiled during the 15 days I spent in the Holy Land... the flight and trip are among the fondest memories I have and to all who had a part in making it possible, I am deeply grateful. We have been more than amply repaid for the little we were able to do for all of

you. Perhaps ‘little’ is not the right word, because it was your life that was at stake, as well as the continuation of your family for future generations...”

The 18th C British parliamentarian Edmund Burke once said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.”

So this is no ordinary thank you that we offer you. We thank you for showing us the *reverse*: that the defeat of evil can happen when good people do ***something***.

Please know, dear neighbors, that the something you have done and continue to do, runs this deep for all of us.

We have continued all week to be so incredibly moved by your profound act of solidarity, as humans, as neighbors, as people with a shared hope for a world that accepts and celebrates diversity, and doesn’t confuse it with divisiveness.

We look forward to many more happy years of raising and educating our children side by side, and are so grateful to have such loving neighbors.

As we approach the Jewish new year just 12 days from now, may the Shofar we blow each morning in this month of Elul awaken in us the courage, the love, and ultimately the humanity, to perform the mitzvah “v’ahvata l’ra’echa kamocho,” regularly and often. And let us say, Amen.