

As a kid, I remember putting a parsley seed into a Styrofoam cup of dirt for Tu B'Shevat. I must have been six or seven. The teacher explained that we would take the cups home, put a small amount of water in daily and watch for magic to happen. That first week, I was curious and watered the dirt religiously. But as the days went by and nothing changed, I lost interest and patience. My sister, on the other hand who is still nurturing, found great excitement in tending the seed and would run to see what was happening with the dirt every morning and so she and our mother took to watering the seeds together. One morning, a green leaf stretched from the soil. Day after day the leaves got bigger and the plant turned into real parsley. Magic had occurred. I became a believer. Excitedly, I told the teacher of the leaves, and she said, "There are many things hidden in unexpected places, even in dirt." And so I went digging in our back yard and did not find much of anything in the dark, dense, woods behind our house. Now, as an adult, I know that along with water, dirt and seeds, we need faithfulness to cause plants to reach towards the heavens. With mindful attention, with care, all things grow and become something beautiful-something unexpected. With mindful attention, all things stretch towards heaven.

Unfortunately, in this time of pervasive busyness, many of us forget to pay attention. We are endlessly running from one activity to the next: from work to carpools to returning e-mails and phone calls, to errands. There hardly seems time to give anything a great deal of notice. When we feel the pressures of time closing around us, we become less aware of the humanity of others, much less the richness of the earth.

Every morning, it takes Bailey ten minutes to get from our front door to the car. We do not have a driveway a mile long. But she looks at every tree, every blade of grass, says hello to the ants and the bees and is always astonished by flowers. Most of the time, I look at my watch and remind her that we need to get to school. Perhaps, I should take a page from Bailey's book and look around me.

She pays the same attention to people and has taught me to look at faces more carefully. The beauty of that one's eyes, his smile, and the way her chin defines her face. But when time seems to be of the essence. I miss it all. Most of us do- we focus on the lack of time, rather than the blessing of time. And we see people as vessels, rather than *malachim*, angels, because we are on a schedule- and our schedule is the most important.

The Reverend Stephen Bauman teaches that, "we live in a time when unrestricted, individual expression is thought to be the highest good. We should all- after the age of 21- be allowed to do whatever we want, whenever we want, wherever we want. So long as that principle is exalted above all others, all other truth is of secondary importance. In our environment all values are equalized and tolerance ascends the throne as the greatest virtue. This is well and good until we smack up against something we should not tolerate- racism, indifference, the genocide in Darfur. People schooled only in the rights of free expression make for poor citizens in a complex world of competing claims. We need to look for a truth greater than our own self interest."

But here, in America, in Port Washington, are the values nurtured? Are we teaching our kids to take responsibility for the world? Are we teaching them to look beyond their own accomplishments and college futures? I may be making a gross generalization, but it is not without a kernel of truth. It is okay to set boundaries. It is okay to say no to our children, to the excesses in society, to what everyone else is doing. We are growing children in the same way we grow plants. They need just the right amount of food and water, they need tethered stakes to keep them growing in the right direction. They need mindful attention. They need to be cut back at times to result in flourishing shoots, and re-rooted in larger pots. Our children need our loving response- and part of that response is limit setting.

Lack of boundaries creates an atmosphere of permissiveness in this world- the same atmosphere that promotes pre-teen kingpins and queen bees at Weber, is the same

atmosphere that allows the lack of world outcry to the slaughter in Darfur and publicly permits countries to rage against Israel for protecting her borders.

Imagine my surprise when I opened the New York Times magazine this past Sunday to find an article about Wendy Mogel, the child psychologist who wrote *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*. The title of the article was “*So the Torah is a parenting guide: Enough with the over-parenting, the key to properly raised kids is Jewish law.*” We are reminded in the article that, “our kids, teach the Talmud, do not belong to us. They are borrowed from God. This means that we need to let go. We can’t control their grades- we can’t control what college they get into, whether they become the captain of the soccer team.

My father thought I had a natural aptitude for tennis- and I did, but certainly not enough to make it in the big time much less college tennis. My Dad recognized this and allowed me to quit, rather than get me coach after coach and try to mold me into someone I was not.

Many parents, says Mogel, are so focused on their children’s future, that when their kids come from school with the words, “I have a test”, they are freed from any other obligation. No garbage to take out, no room to clean. And when they receive a failing grade, tutors, and coaches and extra classes prepare them for one realm of their lives. But we, she says, are forgetting about the second realm: that of the home, that of relationship, that of personal responsibility. Mogel states that the most important thing we can teach our children is *derech erez*, translated in Hebrew as law of the land. *Derech Eretz* is how we treat others. Its taking responsibility for our lives and understanding that there are lines not to be crossed. Its understanding that creating *meschlikite* kids is more important than grades or sports acumen. I am a rabbi, and I do believe that Hebrew School is more important than soccer. What a surprise. I pray that my kids will have a natural aptitude for sports- and they will play sports. But at each activity they will learn something different. Soccer will teach them how to play

on a team. Hebrew school will teach them how to be responsible, caring, *menschlich* adults.

In the past three years, I have become a parent of three. I want my children to grow up with values, and morals, ethics and a strong Jewish identity. I want them to know that as Jews we stand up for justice. I want them to say thank you and recognize that no one has to give them a thing. I want them to understand that every toy, every book, every piece of clothing is a gift that many around the world do not possess. I want them to know that there is a time and a place for everything. And that people and manners come first. I know that their future behavior begins with me and with Shane. If we are not aware of our actions- if we don't put away the cell phones and the computers and turn off the televisions around the kids. If we don't eat dinner together and make them aware of our charitable donations, both financial and physical- our children and their children will never learn the lesson. If they don't see us spend loving time together, and celebrating Judaism together, they will not have the modeling. And will not do the same for their families. I have realized as a parent that children watch and repeat everything- everything. We, their teachers, as well as the entire community serves as exemplars even when we are unaware.

There have been times in my ten years as a Rabbi that I have felt as if I am treated as a religious vessel, rather than a religious human being. I feel this way when people schedule me for funerals without seeing if I am available first. I feel this way when Bar Mitzvah students do not show up for our appointments or when congregants remind me what I need to add into a service. When we refuse to see people as people, our kids will do the same. The buck is passed again and again.

There is a bulletin board, down by Rabbi Zeplovitz's office. On the board are pieces of photo paper with the names, faces and mitzvah projects of our Bar/Bat Mitzvah students. Over the past year, the pictures and the names have been scratched out with push pins, several times. Now the good news was that there was no pattern to the faces scratched out. It was not one group of kids versus another. The bad news

was that it kept happening, in spite of letters and discussions. We still do not know who was responsible- and it truly does not matter because those who did it have to live with it. But it was still wanton destruction. It may have seemed to be just names and faces on photo paper. No big deal. But to me, to the clergy and the teachers, and our lay leaders and our parents it was much more. When the name of God is written on paper, we do not throw that piece of paper away. We bury it in a Jewish cemetery- in a geniza because God's name is holy. Our names and our faces, created in the Divine image are not just words and pictures printed on paper. They are sacred. And should be treated as such.

We are responsible for each other. We are all connected- and need to understand this truth. There are times, for us all, when we could open our eyes to the pain of the person sitting beside at shul, or offer a smile to the doctor's assistant whose boss is running an hour late. There are times when we could all acknowledge the humanness of those around us and with mindful attention, cultivate their spirit. We could sow seeds in their souls.

In the sixteenth century, the great Kabbalistic Rabbi, Isaac Luria, taught a mystical cosmology of the world, the spiritual version of the big bang. He determined that in the beginning there was Eyn Sof, the Divine Source of Being. This Eyn Sof took the form of a powerful light stored in a vessel. Because the power of the light was too great for its container, the vessel shattered and the shards of light imbedded themselves around the world. These holy sparks were deeply hidden in everyone and everything. It is our duty, wrote Luria, as beings created in the image of God, B'zelem Eloheim, to uncover these sparks of light and restore the world to wholeness. Everything we encounter has the potential for holiness if we but look. With intention and attention, the sparks immerge, just as a seed sprouts from the earth. And every act that we perform for others, no matter how seemingly insignificant or how apparently grand, repairs the world. This act of reparation is called Tikkun Olam, and points to the value and importance of every life. Tikkun

Olam teaches us that with attention, every human being, every human being, has the potential to reveal that which was hidden, and shine forth divine, holy light.

Rabbi Irwin Kula, president of CLAL, and author of many Jewish books once spoke to a group of physicians in New Jersey. After the lecture, one doctor approached him to speak further of Judaism and healing. At one point, Rabbi Kula raised the Talmudic teaching that each person is regarded as the world entire, and that each individual possesses infinite value. The Rabbi asked the physician what it would mean if each doctor treated every patient as a human being rather than a medical case.

Three weeks later, the doctor had called Rabbi Kula and told him how much his practice had changed in spite of many new patients. He had taken the teaching to heart, and began to listen to the person behind the symptoms. Rather than requiring every patient to strip naked and put on the immodest gown, the doctor had taken to asking the patient to remove the articles of clothing around the area to be looked at. Patients felt acknowledged, the doctor felt more fulfilled and holy sparks rose from their hiding place. We all have the potential, in whatever we do, wherever we are, to cultivate these relationships, and enrich the world.

In Torah, Exodus 28 reminds us how we are to see each other. God commands the High Priest Aaron to create a bejeweled costume for doing God's work. On the inside of the golden breastplate, resting over Aaron's heart would be inscribed the names of the tribes of Israel so that the High Priest remembered for whom he worked. And on the headpiece, resting between Aaron's eyes was written *Kadosh L'Adonai*, to remind the people that Aaron was a holy being. The headpiece was not a mere plastic tiara like we purchase at Party City. It was an ornate silver, heavy crown- much like what the Torah wears. Even when Aaron took off the headpiece, the words were permanently embedded in his skin. We too have these words inscribed in our hearts and on our heads; they are just not as visible. We need to work to see them. But when we do, we remember that we are all here to serve each other and ultimately God. We are all *Kadosh L'Adonai*. We are all holy souls.

There is a very old Jewish mystical tradition that determines that there are 36 truly righteous people on the planet at one time. If one ceases to exist, the world is destroyed. These lamed vovnikim- 36 people- do not know that they are holy teachers. They just go about their days, changing the earth and others.

I am convinced that there is a lamed vovnik, who is a member of this congregation. He does not know that I feel this way. He spends his days healing the broken souls around him. He is not a doctor, nor a psychiatrist, just someone who sees a need and addresses it. Several weeks ago, I went to a soup kitchen with him where he sponsored a luncheon for over 300 hungry men, women and children. They did not know who their benefactor was, for like the rest of us, he was dressed in an apron, with a Mets hat on his head serving soup. He quietly acknowledged each and every person who came for a meal with a nod and a smile. This is how he does much of everything on this earth. He carries clothing in his car and when he sees someone in need, he gives them warmth. He collects love in the form of material things and transfers it from one soul to another- without fanfare- without acknowledgement. With the true understanding of a *gute neshamah*- a good Jewish soul.

My Rabbi, Larry Kushner writes that, "Each lifetime is the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. For some there are more pieces. For others the puzzle is more difficult to assemble... Know this. No one has within themselves all the pieces to their puzzle. Everyone carries within them at least one and probably many pieces to someone else's puzzle." I am not a good puzzler- I don't have the patience or the tolerance to sit and fit things together- but I can see the big picture and what can fit where and who puts it all together. And I've come to realize that its all God.

When we see all human beings- even the hungry, the homeless, the quiet, as created in the image of God, as possessing hidden holy sparks, we increase our chance of completing our own puzzle and helping others to do the same.

Seeing others Bzelem Eloheim, in the image of God, can only come from recognizing the blessings that we have been granted in life. When we are grateful for what we have, we feel the need to give back. Sometimes this giving is modeled by parents, or taught by the desire to leave a legacy. Sometimes it's a yearning to fill the empty place inside. Or a feeling of obligation imposed by our own gifts. Most of us have been given more blessings than we are even aware of. And when we become too involved with the details of living, our blessings hide themselves, waiting to be tended to.

Several years ago, I taught a particularly angry, disrespectful group of seventh graders. By the end of the year, I don't know who was more excited by the prospect of no Hebrew School, I or the students. During the last class, rather than have a party because I felt that they did not deserve it, I asked the 22 seventh graders to look at the person beside them and say aloud what made that person unique. During the course of the year, the kids had picked on each other, made each other cry, ostracized some of the group- played the whole queen bee and kingpin game to the hilt, but for one hour their responses were magnificent because they looked at each other, really looked. The popular, pretty girl looked at the one who always had her nose in a science fiction book and said, "You are smart, you see things differently, you are patient, you wear a Jewish star which tells me that Judaism is important to you." And the Star Trekie told the soccer player, that he wished he could be more graceful on the playing field. And he asked the soccer star to kick a ball with him once in a while before Hebrew school so he would feel so alone. For an hour, these kids looked at each other and related to each other. Each student was able to hear a blessing and to then give one back. They sat a bit taller. I wish that I could say the exercise changed their attitudes towards each other the next year- but maybe sometime in their lives, they will remember that one hour and it will make a difference.

We can see others in the image of God, only when we see ourselves as blessed by God. When we begin to treat those around us as possessing the hidden spark of holiness, the world will continue the process of Tikkun Olam and fix itself. These acts need not be miracles on a grand scale. Just imagine if we all did something as simple as putting the grocery carts back at Stop and Shop when we finished with them, if we wrote a thank you card to someone who didn't expect it; if we called someone to say I miss you. Imagine if we picked up someone else's trash on the sidewalk; if we gave our seat on the train to someone who really needed it; if we allowed another driver to merge ahead of us- without gunning our engine and raising our middle finger. Imagine if we spent an hour with someone who was sick; - especially if that someone we did not know. Imagine if we volunteered to work at the soup kitchen at the INN in Hempstead or made sandwiches for their guests each and every Tuesday night between religious school, 7<sup>th</sup> grade and Havurat Noar. 20 minutes to feed over 200 souls. Imagine if we were able to hold back on our criticisms and see each other as wearing the words Kadosh L'Adonai. Imagine if we did this all in the presence of our children, our grandchildren, children we don't even know. Imagine what this world could be if we would but live with the open eyes of a two year old who sees every spark, and whose hands and heart is always open.

In the words of our poet John Lennon: Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can. No need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people, sharing all the world

You may say that I'm a dreamer, But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us. And the world will live as one.

You may say that I am a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. Someday, I pray that  
you'll join us and the world will live as one.