

G'mar chatimah tovah, everyone. Let me begin my remarks this morning by telling you a story:

A man in a small village acquired a beautiful horse. All of the villagers said, "How wonderful! You are richly blessed!"

"Ah," replied the man "What seems to be a blessing can be a curse."

Some time later the horse ran away. The villagers rushed to console the man after the loss of his prized possession. Replied the man, "What seems like a curse can be a blessing." And sure enough the horse returned one day with a whole herd of beautiful horses, making the man exceedingly rich.

The villagers congratulated him with great gusto, but no sooner had the celebrations ended when his son was riding the horse one day and broke his leg badly. And yet this injury prevents him from being conscripted to fight in a war. And so the story continues.

In this Chinese folk tale, retold by Jewish storyteller Joel Ben Izzy, what seems like a blessing may be a curse; and what seems like a curse may be a blessing. Certainly, our hope is always that when misfortune befalls us, we'll be able to move through it in a way that opens our eyes to blessing. But we know there are no guarantees. What is certain is that in the course of our lives each of us goes through periods of darkness and difficulty. This morning, the question I'd like to address is this: In difficult times, how do we find solace? And, when others are suffering, how do we provide help?

During the Yizkor service we chant Psalm 30, often associated with times of loss and grief. I'd like to translate and offer an interpretation for one of its central verses

<i>Gam ki elech</i>	Though I walk
<i>b' gehy tzal mavet.</i>	Through the valley of the shadow of death.
<i>Lo ira ra</i>	I will fear no evil
<i>Ki atah imadi</i>	for you are with me

The author -- the psalmist -- is in perhaps the darkest place we can imagine, walking in peril, in a place of suffering and loss. And yet the psalmist has no fear. Somehow, she or he finds comfort in a sense of God's presence, and suddenly is no longer walking alone.

Some have told me that at their times of greatest trial -- struggling through illness, facing mortality, confronted with terrible loss -- they feel an almost palpable closeness to God. It is as if their experience has stripped away all of their mundane concerns, and brought them closer to the Source of truth and life.

Others, though, may feel entirely alone and abandoned by God at their times of greatest darkness. And many experience a dizzying combination of both extremes. It may be in order to address the moments when we do not feel God's presence that the psalmist wisely continues the verse:

<i>Shivtecha</i>	your rod
<i>U'mishantecha</i>	and your staff
<i>Heima yinachemuni</i>	they comfort me

What are the rod and the staff? To the modern ear, they may sound like harsh instruments of judgment or discipline. But for the psalmist who was familiar with the ways of the shepherd, they are exactly the opposite. They are the means by which the shepherd extends his or her reach to aid sheep in his flock, keeping them in the safe area, helping them climb out of ditches in the field.

I remember being in a dark depression, I was young, living halfway around the world with no family and only few friends, and I had received word that a beloved family member had just died. I felt lost, disconnected, alone, floating weightlessly in the atmosphere with nothing and no one. Somehow I got myself off the floor and into a convenience mart nearby. And the clerk, rather than impersonally ringing up my purchase, asked me if I was OK. I don't remember exactly what else he said, but I remember that he genuinely seemed to care about me. In that moment of connection, I no longer felt alone. In that time of despair, the clerk's simple kindness helped to see me through.

When darkness clouds out God's spiritual presence and comfort, we must be the rod and the staff. We experience God's love and protection through the ways that we take care of one another.

This is the work of *chesed* -- of love expressed as deed. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says of *Chesed*: "Theologians define *hesed* as covenant love. Covenant is the bond by which two parties pledge themselves to one another, each respecting the freedom and

integrity of the other, agreeing to join their separate destinies into a single journey that they will travel together, ...It is love moralized into small gestures of help and understanding, support and friendship: the poetry of everyday life written in the language of simple deeds.”

A member of our community experienced a devastating loss. When I asked him about Kehillah members bringing tangible help, meals, companionship, He said to me, “you mean people will help me even if they don’t know me?” And when I answered, of course, that we cared when another was in pain, he began to weep. Another person described the experience to me this way: “When my mother died, I felt like the greatest source of love left my life. And now I understand *shivah*, because people came to the home offering such concern that the void was met by an overflowing of love.”

Reaching out in love provides comfort and solace to the individual. But quietly, almost imperceptibly, these acts of *chesed* weave us together in sacred community. And they become the story of our lives.

When our son, Solomon, turned two, he received a birthday package in the mail. While the gifts inside – a wooden train set and a book – were lovely, more remarkable was the sender. Mama Frankie, now 96 years old, ran the nursery school that my husband, Ben – and all his siblings -- had attended in the early ‘60s. I was amazed and delighted that, 40 years later, she was reaching out and connecting with generosity and care to yet another generation. This past summer, I got to meet her, and I’d like to share her story with you.

We arrived at Mama Frankie’s house on a hot July day. She came to the door with the use of a cane and asked me to stand close so she could make out my face. Ushering us in, she pulled out a box for Sol, a curious combination of high tech electronic toys and dusty leggos that looked as if they might had been in play since the 1950’s. The tables, walls and mantle were filled with pictures of family and friends. And Mama Frankie and I sat down to talk.

She spoke to me about her wonderful first husband, known as “Daddy Bill”. She told me how, after their second child was stillborn, she and Daddy Bill decided that they would share their love with more children by opening a nursery school. Today, the 15-acres property still seems to hold the joyous energy of the hundreds of youngsters who

tumbled through the Blue Bird Nursery School's doors. It seemed to me like a child's wonderland -- a kid-powered merry-go-round still stood next to a gentle hill where children went sledding during the Michigan winters. Nearby were the Maple trees where Mama Frankie and Daddy Bill had taught their charges how to tap maple syrup. The arts and crafts house was just a short walk from an open meadow. At the center of the meadow still stood a concrete oval for adventurous youngsters to ride their tricycles and zoom around in pedal-powered race cars.

As we talked, Mama Frankie told me of the death of Daddy Bill, and, years later, of her second husband as well. She has outlived many friends, and her eyesight is limited by macular degeneration. It wouldn't surprise us if she saw her life through a lens of loss. But because she has given and received love throughout her life, and continues to do so, she is part of a web of connections that continue to bring her joy and satisfaction.

She cannot go to the supermarket without being recognized by someone -- either because she helped raise them, or their children or their grandchildren -- or possibly all three. With the help of family, friends and church members she is able to maintain her lifestyle. And she showed me how she does just fine at her weekly bridge games with the aid of a fluorescent lamp and a deck of large-print playing cards.

Our culture places a high value on self-sufficiency. On the one hand, this leads many of us to value being in control, able to handle any situation. The other side of the equation is that many of us feel uncomfortable offering help. We assume that others should just be able to take care of themselves, or that we would be embarrassing them or intruding on their lives if we offered assistance. I have had people say to me that they have not volunteered to bring a meal to a family or helped to make a shiva minyan -- a quorum of ten for prayer -- at the home of a mourner because they don't feel they know the family well enough -- that it would be intrusive.

But if you remember one thing from my remarks this morning, let it be this: we reach out to one another not because we always know one another, but because we are in community together. None of us will get through this life without pain, and the Jewish tradition tells us that we have the power to help each other, to bring God into the world by caring for one another. We cannot squander this power when others are in need

because of social discomfort. The face of the other is where we encounter the trace of God.

At this time, when each of us is considering how to bring more holiness and meaning into our lives and into the world, let me urge you: this year, when you receive the e-mail from the Caring Committee saying that someone is in need sign up to help. Don't ask first, "Do I know them?" Ask instead, "Where do they live? When can I get there? Which meals still need bringing? Can I get there in time for a minyan?"

Rabbi Yael Ridberg teaches that in chapter 30 of Deuteronomy, the last verse reads: "u'vaharta bachaim l'ma-an tichye" —choose life that you might live. The medieval rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra tells us that "hahayim khem l'ahava" — life is for love — and explains, "ki hu hayekha" — for God is life.

Yom Kippur places before us the fact of our mortality, and the terrifying truth that we cannot control everything, that we do not know what will happen to us tomorrow. What we do know, what we can do, is to choose a life of reaching out, of connecting in sacred community. This is how we know God and bring God's presence into our midst.

May it be a year in which we choose life... choose *chesed*, choose love as sacred deed. Amen. G'mar Tov.