

“Changing Ourselves, Changing the World”

This last year, I made a pilgrimage of sorts to one of our country’s great historic sites – the birthplace of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The National Historic Site encompasses an entire neighborhood, and the street on which Dr. King grew up is preserved just as it was.

I could so easily picture Dr. King strolling to church on Sunday morning, conversing with friends and neighbors about the issues of his day. For down the street is Ebenezer Baptist Church, again preserved exactly as it was when his father, and then Dr. King himself, was pastor. I stood among the modest sanctuary pews, and looked up to the mighty pulpit from which an entire nation was charged in eloquent sermons to rise up against segregation and racism. This was it, ground zero of the Civil Rights movement.

I froze in awe, as the sound system played the sermonic voice of a pastor who literally walked the walk, who took his words out of the sanctuary and into the streets, all the way to Selma and Washington D.C. And I also have to share with you one small moment of personal clergy amusement. Descending the stairs to the small Social Hall in the Ebenezer Church basement, I could not help but imagine Dr. King at *his* Oneg Shabbat with punch and cookies, ensnared by *his* version of Mrs. Schwartz complaining about her donation not being noted in the bulletin (which I’m sure he handled gracefully).

Finally, there is his tomb, set amid beautiful flowing waters, evoking one of Dr. King’s favorite verses from the Prophet Amos: “Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Standing there I thought to myself, out of the hundreds of African American pastors in this country, why did Dr. King take upon himself this calling? What prompted him to be the leader, the voice, the symbol of the Civil Rights Movement? As he told us then and history has enshrined, he had a dream. A dream so profound and true and piercing, that America could not refuse it.

Throughout time, there have been the special few who have stood out as change-agents. Those courageous individuals who were willing to put themselves at risk, be jailed or even killed for their ideas. Moses stood up to Pharaoh and freed the Israelite slaves. Rabbi Akiba died with the Torah wrapped around his body and the Shema on his lips, as he was burned at the stake by the Romans. Dr. King was shadowed by government agents, jailed for non-violent protest, and ultimately slain by an assassin’s bullet. These are the dreamers and visionaries and risk takers who are willing to bring voice to radical new thoughts, and stand up for great ideas.

As we come together tonight, at the dawn of this New Year, change is exactly what's on our minds. We're supposed to look with fresh eyes on our world and ask, where are we? What still needs work? How can our future look different than our present? What impels people to stand up, stand out, step forward as leaders? What would it take for me to be a change-agent?

In Forbes Magazine, Carmine Gallo writes about leadership. He tells of a growing body of research that shows how our brains are actually wired to resist change and stick with the status quo. Apparently, there is a "go" and "no go" signal in the brain, with the "no go" signal usually having the strong upper hand. But creators and innovators, those who break through the status quo, have learned intuitively how to override that no go signal. He cites one particular brain scientist who describes the way change agents think: "If you believe the world is broken in a certain way and you have an idea to fix it, 'follow your convictions relentlessly.'"

Gallo brings some interesting case studies. He tells about Matt Weiner who wanted nothing more than to be a writer, but was rejected from every writing class in college. Still, he kept trying to write scripts, even though every script he submitted was also rejected. There was one particular script he kept passing around to studios for four years. Finally, an AMC executive got hold of it and a new television series was born. You might have heard of it – a little show called, "Mad Men."

Gallo writes that, "Inspiring leaders capture our imagination because they didn't let naysayers divert them from taking the road less traveled." Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz once told Gallo that even his own business partners didn't think Americans would pay for lattes and cappuccinos. CNN's Anderson Cooper was told repeatedly as a young copy editor that he would never be on the air. And Wendy Kopp said that most people thought her goal of reducing education inequality was just the little pipe dream of a Princeton student, that is until "Teach for America" transformed our schools nationwide.

Meaningful change starts with one worthy aspiration, something that is so strongly felt that we are willing to put ourselves on the line, overcome our fear of risk, override our no-go brain signal, and have enough confidence to believe in ourselves instead of the naysayers. This is what drove a Moses, a Rabbi Akiba, a Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

But, there is also another kind of change agent. This is different from person with a big ideal or a relentless dream. The other kind of change agent is a regular person who finds him or herself in a moment of great opportunity. Admiral Halsey once famously said of his command during WWII: "There are no

extraordinary men, just extraordinary circumstances that ordinary men are forced to deal with.” These are the first responders of 9/11, the three buddies who recently took down a violent terrorist on a Paris bound train.

One of those kinds of heroes who really touched and inspired me, died this July at the ripe old age of 106. He was a stockbroker in London in 1938, following a very normal career path. Except the world around him was not so normal. He was planning to take a ski vacation to Switzerland but, at the last minute, decided to change his itinerary and, instead, visit an old friend stationed at the British Embassy in Prague. It was on that trip that he came face to face with the Holocaust, already in full operation in Eastern Europe.

Though not himself Jewish, he simply could not turn his back on the desperate Jewish parents coming to the embassy, who knew that the only hope for their children’s survival was for them to be smuggled out of Czechoslovakia. So for the next 10 months, he set up an elaborate operation that involved bribes, forgeries, corrupt Nazis and Czech railway officials, and a lot of fundraising back in England.

When all was said and done, he had managed to smuggle out 669 children in 7 separate clandestine trainloads, bringing them to safety in London, where he had arranged host families for each child. Almost all of those children ultimately became orphans by the end of the Holocaust, as their families perished in the camps. And perhaps for this reason, they became known as “Winton’s Children.”

As time went on, nobody knew much about Nicholas Winton, least of all the children he saved, because most were too young to even remember the details of their escape. He was not famous like Oskar Schindler or Raul Wallenberg. He eventually enlisted in the Royal Air Force during the war, married and had three children, and for 50 years never mentioned the work he had done to save the children. One day, his wife was cleaning out the attic and came across the evidence – a scrapbook that was filled with pictures, lists of names, travel documents, and pleading letters from families. She demanded to know what she was looking at!

He brushed her off, and said the papers didn’t have any more value to anyone, and she should throw them away. But she protested: “You can’t throw those papers away,” she said, “They are children’s lives.” Once she figured it out, she wanted others to know what had happened. So, she arranged for her husband to attend a taping of the BBC Television program called, “That’s Life.”

The show began, featuring a woman & her childhood journey to freedom from the Nazi Holocaust. When finally asked if she knew who saved her, she replied that didn’t know. It was then that she was informed that the man responsible for her

rescue was sitting right next to her – and both she and Winton, quite shocked, turned toward each other and immediately embraced & broke into tears. Next, the program host asked if there was anybody else in the audience who was saved by Nicolas Winton. At that moment, Winton discovered that he was surrounded by scores of his children, as those whose lives he saved stood up all around him with applause, and tears were everywhere.

Today, it is estimated that Winton's children and their offspring total more than six thousand. Six thousand human beings who would not have walked this earth were it not for the efforts of one man in one ten month period of his life. He had no idea what his efforts could mean, only that there was an immediate opportunity to save these children. When asked in 2001, why he did what he did, he said:

One saw the problem there, that a lot of these children were in danger, and you had to get them to what was called a safe haven, and there was no organization to do that. Why did I do it? Why do people do different things? Some people revel in taking risks, and some go through life taking no risks at all.

Nicholas Winton exemplified another kind of change maker. Someone who saw that immediate action had to be taken, who overrode the no-go signal in his brain, and put himself in harm's way for the good of others.

Of course, it's hard to know what we would do in such extraordinary circumstances, whether we would be the heroes of 9/11, or of Admiral Halsey's fleet, or join the underground resistance during the Holocaust. But should we ever be tested in a way large or small, these examples certainly inspire us to realize that every *little* moment can actually be an opportunity to do *great* good in the world.

I have a theory. It's just a theory, but I've found it to be true that there is a certain sense of duty that such people carry. Those who rise selflessly to serve others, whether with a great vision like Dr. King, or in the immediacy of one special moment like Nicholas Winton, they feel in some way that, because of that which was given to them, they should pay it forward to their neighbors, their country, or even to absolute strangers.

And this is what I think largely leads people to be agents of good in the world, whether persistent dreamers or momentary heroes. It's a basic sense of duty that arises from being grateful.

Gratitude is an interesting thing, really. In Judaism, we would say that gratitude is our response to *chesed* – to something we received that is unearned or undeserved. I was born in Southern California and spent most of my life in this

beautiful part of the world. I was born after the State of Israel was declared, and the sacrifices of all my Jewish ancestors bequeathed the gift of Jewish sovereignty and freedom to me as a Jew in America. I did nothing to earn these, but was privileged to inherit them from others who paid them forward to me.

I am tremendously grateful for the gifts that have been handed down to me and, because of them, I feel a profound sense of duty to my children, the Jewish people, my country, and the State of Israel. I believe this is something most of us feel, even if we're not civil rights visionaries or captains of industry, or heroes in a particular moment of destiny.

And on an even deeper, spiritual level, gratitude is what we feel toward what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called, "the inconceivable surprise of living." Heschel wrote: "It is so embarrassing to live! How strange we are in the world, and how presumptuous our doings! Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve... It is gratefulness that makes the soul great."

I think that those who lack gratitude, who feel entitled, who believe the world owes them something, will never be real change agents. Their "no go" mentality will not allow them to dream beyond their self-interest or their expectation of a reward. But a person who feels gratitude, will transcend him or herself, and be instinctively moved in some way to pay it forward.

In this spirit, my friend, Rabbi Bill Berk, who now lives full time in Jerusalem, wrote this reflection about what it means to be Israeli:

After the Holocaust the Jewish people made the decision to live. It could easily have gone the other way. By all rights we could have walked away from the whole thing. But instead we signed on for another hitch. We re-affirmed our Covenant with the Holy One of Blessing. I can't prove it. I can only testify to it. But it seems to me that the remarkable uplifting energy in this country is tied into this renewal. We are alive and we are committed to life...

At the most basic level we can say we are alive, and life itself is a gift. Whatever we have inherited, whatever we have or don't have, we can be grateful.

And this is what Rosh Hashana is all about and what brings us together tonight. A New Year of life is before us. Turning the page from last year to this New Year, we celebrate the gratitude we feel. Apples and honey, the blast of the shofar, the gathering of family and community, they are all gifts handed down by our parents and grandparents, all the way from our ancient ancestors. Because these were given to me, I resolve to give to others.

I will stand up for equality and opportunity in America, for our fragile planet earth, for Judaism and the Jewish people, and for our beloved State of Israel. I will make the most out of my marriage and be the best father I can be in this fleeting chance at parenthood. I will pursue my passions, and work at things I love. I will change the world, without even knowing how or when my words will be heard, or who will one day be the beneficiaries of my deeds. To be grateful means that the world owes me nothing, and the unearned gift of life is something I must pay forward in whatever way I can. I may not be a great visionary or leader like Dr. King, or an ordinary person who finds himself in extraordinary circumstances like Nicholas Winton, but this I can do – I can be a change agent in my own right by simply deepening my gratitude for the “inconceivable surprise of living” and paying it forward.

“It is gratefulness that makes the soul great.”

Those who see life this way are the ones who change this world, impact lives, overcome risk and limitation, and courageously dream of doing what others have yet to imagine.

So, this is my simple message to you tonight – in this New Year, we can all try to be a little more grateful, to treasure the remarkable legacies entrusted to us, and resolve to pay them forward in the world. As our Talmud teaches us: “My ancestors planted for me and I must plant for my children.” This is the gift of Rosh Hashana – a chance to change ourselves, and change the world.