



# CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

## **Yom Kippur 5774** ***Will Apathy Be Our Legacy?*** **By Abigail Pogrebin**

Is apathy inherited? Is inaction passed on from generation to generation? Will our lack of responsiveness to global anguish be passed on to our children?

When it comes to the question of whether our sins will be visited upon generations to come, Sinai and the Golden Calf offer us a clue.

While the story is likely familiar to us, its connection to Yom Kippur may be less well known: Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive God's law. But he was gone so long that the Israelites doubted he was coming back. In their panic, they turned to Moses' brother and lieutenant, Aaron, to help them build a totem to stand in for God. (Exodus 32:1) Aaron instructed his people to turn over their gold jewelry and he melted it down to mold the golden calf.

When God observed this heresy and distrust, God was disgusted and enraged, vowing to destroy the entire people and start a new line from Moses. But Moses went back up the peak to talk God down, asking what was the point of destroying a people so recently delivered. God relented and on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Tishrei (Yom Kippur), Moses returned to his flock with a message of atonement. But God made clear that the leniency was not open-ended, saying, "[God] does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations." (Exodus 34:7)

The sinner's descendants pay a price.

Whether one thinks it's fair to punish a child for a parent's missteps, there's no escaping the reality of inherited sins. If our children see us lose our temper with a waiter, aren't they likely to mistreat people who serve them in the future? If our children watch us texting while we're talking to them, haven't they learned that one needn't give someone full attention? If our children see us choose to go to a yoga class instead of a colleague's *shiva*, haven't we taught them priorities? And on a more indelible scale, if our children see that our most generous acts are done almost entirely for our inner circle of family and friends, rarely for the stranger—the factory worker we don't know in Bangladesh, the nurse toiling without medical supplies in Tanzania, the child (whose blistered feet could be our child's feet) walking miles to school in Mexico—then how should they possibly absorb the message that we have a responsibility to alleviate suffering, no matter how distant the pain?

I can't hold myself up as a role model. For the last three years, every Thursday I've helped serve breakfast at dawn to 100 homeless people at our synagogue. But I don't do anything for them the rest of the week, nor am I involved in efforts to change the system that keeps them homeless.

I participated in Hurricane Sandy relief, but only while the crisis was acute.

I hosted children from the Fresh Air Fund two summers in a row, but couldn't figure out how to remain in their lives without feeling intrusive or awkward, so we lost touch.

So what do my children see? That I'm involved, but to a point. That I give of my time and money, but that my most generous moments involve the people closest to me. That I rarely broach the world's horrors with them because I worry they'll feel traumatized instead of galvanized. That I don't enumerate the checks my husband and I write because it feels inappropriate to list donations.

All of us justify our own action or inaction but I think we too readily say, "I've done enough." It's actually not enough. We all know that the international need is bottomless, and granted, guilt is not a constructive motivator. But when we think about what kind of people we want our children to be, (and I hear so many parents fret about how to make their kids aware of privilege), perhaps we should look at whether we're laying the groundwork for future benevolence or careerism? Do we send the message that we value good work as much as good grades? Are we committing sins of silence that our children are destined to recommit?

God may have been harsh and punitive in promising to "visit the iniquity of parents upon children," but it's a warning worth hearing. When we don't act, our children learn inaction. When we don't read aloud from the morning's toughest news stories, our children are untouched by them. When we aren't willing to upend our comfortable routines to figure out how to help "heal the world," then all our talk about the importance of *tikkun olam* is just talk.

I am the first to say that it's hard to look at global heartbreak without flinching. It's hard to internalize the world's brokenness: girls who are robbed of an education; ethnic minorities who are denied jobs and healthcare; LGBT people who face relentless abuse of their basic human rights; garment workers who are not paid a decent wage; and millions of people who experience the chronic reality of hunger and violence. But our failure to look begets our failure to act. Which begets another generation of bystanders. On these days of renewal and repentance, let's be honest about our sins of inertia and whether, like the ancient crime of the Golden Calf, we're passing them on.



**Abigail Pogrebin** is a former producer for *60 Minutes* and Charlie Rose, and has written for many publications including *The Daily Beast*, *New York Magazine*, and *Tablet*. She is the author of *Stars of Jews: Prominent Jews Talk About Being Jewish* (2005), which is being adapted for the stage, and *One and the Same: My Life as an Identical Twin and What I've Learned About Everyone's Struggle to Be Singular* (2009). She moderates an interview series at the JCC in Manhattan called, "What Everyone's Talking About," and for the last three years has co-authored *Newsweek's* list of Most Influential Rabbis.

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