

Tiny Tinkering Repairs

The Governor's Speech

Governor Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania made a rousing speech at the inaugural Harris/Walz campaign rally in Philadelphia last summer. Though he spoke powerfully, his actual words struck me as relatively generic and uninspired, until just about the very end, when he said:

"I wanna just say this. I lean on my family and I lean on my faith, which calls me to serve. And I am proud of my faith. Now hear me. I'm not here to preach at y'all but I want to tell you what my faith teaches me. My faith teaches me that no one, no one is required to complete the task, but neither are we free to refrain from it. That means that each of us has a responsibility to get off the sidelines, to get in the game, and to do our part."

He was referring to the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, or "repairing the world" or "healing the world" ... the notion being that this is an ongoing work over many, many generations. I love that view. I can get behind it; I can subscribe to it.

I think it's both noble and humble. Noble because it unequivocally assigns purpose to our lives, and humble because it forces us to realize how very tiny -- though essential -- our individual contributions to "the work of repairing the world" really are, against the scale of time.

I was grateful to Shapiro in that moment for the reminder, and my estimation of his humanity shot up.

But for Practical Purposes ...

I don't know how to even begin doing my part to repair the world. What *is* healing/repairing the world? What does that really mean?

If I feel broken inside -- which I often do -- is healing myself part of repairing the world? Must be.

Still, there clearly needs to be some outward dimension to this "task." But that can be confusing.

For example, a few nights after watching that speech, in the space of about 15 minutes, I witnessed -- and to an extent participated in -- two random acts of service and kindness.

I was taking a walk in Mt. Tabor Park and I'd forgotten my water bottle at home. Even though it was early evening and the weather was mild, I realized I was very thirsty, uncomfortably so. I was trudging up a hill in that moment, and a voice above me called out, "Is everything all right?"

I looked up and two athletic-looking young men were descending toward me. "Yeah, I'm good," I responded. "Thanks for asking."

One of them held out his plastic water bottle to me. "Want some water?" he asked.

Oh my gosh. “Yes, I would LOVE some water!” I said.

“Keep it,” he said, handing me the half-empty bottle. “The rest is yours.” And he tapped my shoulder lightly as he walked by. “Have a great night, sir.”

So. Did I want to chance drinking this stranger’s germs? And for all I knew, mightn’t the water be spiked with acid or something?

I drank it immediately. It was delicious and it slaked my thirst perfectly and I stopped worrying.

But there was the problem of the bottle itself. I oppose plastic disposable bottles (especially the little ones that hold less than a quart – such a waste!). They are terrible for our oceans, an insult to Mother Earth. And now I had to dispose of one.

Had the young man who’d given me the water done more world reparation by being kind and thoughtful, or more destruction by buying the little plastic water bottle in the first place? And how complicit was I, for having benefited from his ecological obliviousness?

My Next Encounter

There was a rave party happening on the mountain. Lots of young people were there, one of whom was crushing aluminum cans under her feet by the garbage receptacle, which was overflowing with cans and bottles, mostly cans.

I wedged my own piece of plastic detritus between a couple of the cans that were precariously protruding from the mouth of the receptacle, and I asked the young woman what she was doing, if she was working for the park service, etc.

She said no, it was just something she’d spontaneously decided to do on her own “to clear up a little space,” and anyway it felt good to “get some energy out” by stomping cans.

That sounded pretty righteous to me – random public service with mental health benefits – so I decided to join her. (There were certainly plenty of cans, within and on the ground around the garbage receptacle. We were not about to run out.)

So that felt good until a minute or so later when a young man walked up to us and stated, “Homeless people can’t redeem those cans if you crush them.”

“That’s right,” chimed in another young man who’d walked by at just about the same time. “The bar code has to be readable. They put the cans on this machine that spins them ...”

I don’t remember the rest of what he said but he was affable and impressively well-informed about what happens at the recycling plant.

So we ceased our can-crushing.

Looking at the plethora of cans we hadn't mutilated yet, one of the young men remarked, "This will be a gold mine for somebody."

Sometimes It's Easy

So it can be difficult to know when you're repairing the world, or tearing it down, or maybe doing both at the same time.

Sometimes it's easy to tell though.

Like: I was riding my bicycle on the sidewalk of a busy Portland avenue last week, thinking troubled thoughts, and a very heavy guy in an electric wheelchair was heading toward me on the sidewalk, some 20 yards away, so I swerved off the sidewalk and onto the street.

As we passed each other seconds later, the guy flashed me a big warmhearted grin – a big bright thank-you – and instantly I felt better about all things, just like that. The generosity of spirit in that man's smile had effected a little world repair on me.

And perhaps, by exiting the sidewalk so promptly (as soon as I spotted him), I had done something similar for him.

This is all extremely tiny stuff, I know. You can't even call these things drops in the ocean; they are too micro-micro-microscopic within the sea of phenomena. All these infinitesimal maintenance-type repairs.

But multiply infinitesimal by infinity and what do you get? I'll tell you what you get. You get infinity.

You get a wholly healed hologram in every vanishing eternal moment.

And by the way, all kidding aside, I credit the guy who gave me his water bottle, and the pleasant young can-crushing woman, and the two dudes whose information set us straight and caused us to stop what we were doing. It's complex but it all points in the direction of *tikkun olam*.