

Rabbi Beth H Klafter  
5780 Erev Rosh HaShana  
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### Every Stitch Counts

My paternal grandmother, Rose Lehrman Klafter, was born in Hungary in 1896; she died in her late 80's, during my first year of rabbinic school. My grandfather, Herman, also from Hungary, died before I was born; my middle initial, "H," honors his memory. Rose and Herman met and married in about 1918 in this country and opened Klafter's Upholstery and Draperies in the Five Towns, here on Long Island. Their home was above the shop and my father worked with them after school, helping his father build and recover furniture or assisting in deliveries. In fact, they built a couch for the family which has been in my own home my entire life; I often sit on that couch (since re-upholstered several times) to edit my sermons, including this one.

Grandma Rose continued to work until shortly before she died. I can picture her, concentrating at the sewing machine, her fingers were swollen with arthritis but her eyes and her mind were clear. She was about 85 when my mother's friend commented to her, "Mrs. Klafter, it's marvelous that you go to work." She replied, "Why, a lot of women work today."

On this eve of the new year, I am thinking of my parents and my grandparents. Grandma Rose did not live to see me ordained; she did not see me lead worship or hear me deliver a sermon. Tonight, I am thinking especially of her.

Every profession has its blessings and its challenges. One of the more ubiquitous of being a pulpit rabbi is what we call 'sermon anxiety.' Rabbis wonder how to prepare a sermon when the world is changing by the minute, with each news report, each tweet, each debate. What can the wisdom of our Jewish tradition teach us when the world does not feel 'traditional' at all? And where will I find this year's jokes? Is it even a year when I can bring humor to my message?

So, yes, 'sermon anxiety' is a real thing for rabbis.

My first sermon anxiety dream of this season was actually back in June. In the dream, I found myself here, in the sanctuary of Temple Beth David, on the morning of Erev Rosh HaShana (that would have been this morning). I was arranging the chairs, really, literally arranging the chairs.

And, within the dream, I realized that in addition to the neat arrangement of chairs, the congregation (that would be all of you) was also going to expect me to deliver a couple of sermons during the high holidays. I shared my dream with some rabbinic friends. In doing so, realized that the sermon anxiety dream might actually **be** the sermon.

I started to think that my dream could help me to begin to respond to the vast and global challenges of the day.

During the High Holidays and, indeed, most of the time, we focus on finished products and grand events; public figures and big billboards. Setting up the chairs in my dream reminds me that life is composed of small details; of individual moments; of the efforts of each person whose contribution might be less visible but no less necessary than others.

The famous anthropologist, Jane Goodall said, “You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.”

Judaism teaches us our actions and endeavors matter. Though we may feel numb and immobilized at times, we can be reminded that we are partners with one another and with God in the repair of the world. *Mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, we are taught, one sacred act leads to another. *Avera goreret avera*, one sin leads to another. The rabbis of the Mishnah (Pirke Avot 4.2) explained how one act leads to another. First, it can be as a result of inspiration: someone else may witness us perform a mitzvah, encouraging them to follow our lead. In this way, our own behavior has a greater impact when others join us in taking action. Another way that “*Mitzvah goreret Mitzvah*,” is by habit, in which a person becomes accustomed to performing a mitzvah regularly, bringing an awareness to the behavior (see Jaffe, page 108). So if I give Tzedakah one day and a second and third, I am more likely to continue giving in the days that follow. “*Mitzvah goreret Mitzvah*,” one sacred act leads to another, because no act is unimportant; the smallest deed can change the course of history. We never know how our actions may ripple around the globe or into the future.

Judaism teaches that life is made up of good and evil. For each individual and for the entire community, there is a scale which measures the balance between the two. During these Days of Awe, the scales stand before us. We can tip those scales. Medieval philosopher and scholar, Maimonides, taught: “Free will is given to every human being. ... Nothing holds us back from making a choice between good and evil. The power is in our hands.”

In my dream, I was arranging the chairs to prepare for worship with this sacred community. What if, on the other hand, I had been re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic? Why bother? Because even during times of great turmoil and angst, when we might feel ‘daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief’, there is hope for goodness and success. Hope and opportunity: one deed; one word; one person; one moment at a time.

This summer, while so much of our country and our world experienced conflict and sadness, we were reminded of our capacity to achieve greatness in this nation as we celebrated the 50th anniversary of Apollo 11. On that summer day in 1969, we heard Neil Armstrong declare, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” Apparently what he really said (or intended to say) actually makes much more sense: “That’s one small step for **A** man, one leap for mankind.” Armstrong and the other astronauts, Buzz Alderin and Michael Collins, knew that landing on the moon represented so much for the future of space travel and of human achievement.

How, though, did that singular moment, that one small step, come about?

It was the culmination of days and months and years of preparation; the efforts of so many; individual tasks and decisions made along the way. Imagine how many pencils were sharpened and how many computations were completed. There were teams of people who played a role, without whom those three astronauts would not have walked on the moon, or return safely to their families; without whom the United States would not have accomplished all it did those 50 years ago.

In a book titled, Team Moon, Catherine Thimmesh, explains, “When millions of people tuned in to witness the moonwalk, one thing they wouldn’t see (or probably even think about) were the non-astronauts, those beyond the glare of the limelight.” Thousands helped to ‘tip the scales’ of Apollo 11 to great scientific success; so many of their names and faces were unknown to the public. Yet their efforts made it happen. They were mathematicians and engineers; the men and women who cleaned the offices where the computations were made and put up the coffee for the others. Hidden from the public eye and newscasters, they toiled with diligence and competence. The results of their separate, oftentimes invisible efforts, were enormously visible and valuable on that July day in 1969.

I remember where I was, watching television at my aunt and uncle’s home. I remember the excitement and the iconic images that have become part of our culture. As I was thinking about the arrangement of those chairs in my dream, and the individual tasks behind all the big scenes in front of us, I thought about a detail of Apollo 11: the space suits.

Perhaps you have heard about the astronauts’ spacesuits. The National Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian opened a new exhibit of Apollo artifacts this summer. Using sophisticated technology, the museum has crafted physical and digital replicas of the spacesuits. The technology used today barely existed 50 years ago. In fact, the original space suits were not created by astrophysicists or by advanced computer software. They were not assembled by hi-tech machines.

No, they were custom designed and sewn by hand, stitch by stitch, by a group of seamstresses in a small town in Delaware. These unassuming women had started off their careers stitching bras and girdles at Playtex. [Who knew?]

Had the work been done and completed here on Long Island and not in Frederica, Delaware, perhaps my Grandma Rose would have been one of them.

One of the women, Eleanor Foracker, explained, “We made up each layer separately for the whole suit: arms, legs and body.... We didn’t worry too much until the guys on the moon started jumping up and down. And that gave us a bit of an eye-twitch, because [if one stitch ripped] they would have lost pressure. That was our worst fear.”

At times, the women had to blind stitch the suits, feeling underneath to get the parts to come together, sometimes within one 64th of an inch. For the three astronauts, each stitch was a matter of life and death.

Another seamstress, Bert Pilkenton, reflected, "I had something to do that was great. I did something in my lifetime. I built the suit that went to the moon." She then added a little secret, "When we built the Apollo suit, the one that is now in the Smithsonian Institute, some of us girls' names [are hidden from the rest of the world, written] inside that suit."

One stitch led to another stitch. One seamstress sat beside another. One hour led to a day, led to years of creativity and ingenuity, led to the historic walk on the moon 50 years ago.

While we may feel insignificant in the vast universe, these women teach us that just because a task isn't the most glamorous or most obvious; just because our voice isn't the loudest coming from the moon, doesn't mean that we aren't having an impact. As Mother Teresa wrote, "Be faithful in small things because it is in them that [our] strength lies."

Among the global challenges of our day, perhaps the most urgent is Climate Change. Like other current issues, it is an enormously complex problem and requires multiple, interrelated responses. Significant and lasting solutions require systemic changes in our nation and around the world.

We can also do our part as individuals to have an impact. Tatiana Kennedy Schlossberg, published a new book on this subject just last month, [Inconspicuous Consumption: The Environmental Impact You Don't Know You Have](#). She, as you may know, is the granddaughter of President John F Kennedy, whose words inspired our nation to reach for the moon over half a century ago. "The subject of climate change is inescapable," writes one reviewer of Schlossberg's new book, "But too few stories focus on one's everyday impact upon the environment. The author breaks down exactly how everyday activities - watching Netflix, eating a burger, turning on a light - impact the environment." Schlossberg provides examples and explanations of the ways that our own behaviors have a cumulative impact. Her premise is scary and sobering. It is also empowering and inspiring as she encourages each of us to be informed: "Even the smallest decisions can have profound environmental consequences [either good or bad consequences]." Change and progress happen. One step, one stitch, one voice at a time.

I recently learned about an engineering concept typically found on a ship. It is also on aircrafts. Rabbi Rami Shapiro explains:

*"We will move the world the way a ship captain moves a large ship. You turn a boat by turning its rudder. On large vessels, however, the weight of the water pressing against a massive rudder makes the direct turning of the rudder impossible. Instead, you turn [something called] a trimtab, a small rudder that allows you to turn the larger rudder, which ultimately moves the ship. Working with [Jewish wisdom] we learn how to trimtab, to make small, subtle changes that affect larger ones."*

It is easy to feel overwhelmed today: We may feel that we are drowning in the waves of discord. We may feel small and insignificant as we gaze into the galaxies. We can also embrace the possibilities and opportunities to bring goodness, justice and righteousness into the world. The scales stand before us this day and every day; the choice is in our hands.

“Do not ever think your words are mundane, insignificant or of little impact. Why? Because: *k'chol yotzei mi-pee'v ya'a'seh*. Everything you say creates something, either for good or for bad.”

Movements of change are made up of isolated moments. “Isn't it funny,” noted C.S. Lewis, “how day by day nothing changes, but when you look back everything is different.”

The rows of chairs in our social hall were set up one chair at a time by the men on our building staff, whose names may be unknown to many of you. They are Tom, Miguel, and Ali; Aiden, Gabe and Tyler. Without their time and efforts, our sanctuary would not have been prepared for these sacred High Holidays.

*Avinu Malkenu*, God, our Parent and our Ruler... Inspire us to use each day in the year 5780 to tip the scales toward goodness.

*Avinu Malkenu*, may we navigate the waters of this world, guided by the words and wisdom of Torah.

*Avinu Malkenu*, May our sense of hope and strength be restored, one stitch and one chair at a time.

AMEN

#### SOURCES INCLUDE

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