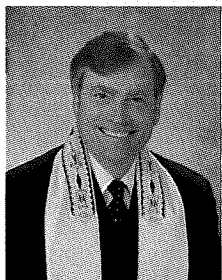


H C R J

MAY 2018

HOUSTON CONGREGATION FOR REFORM JUDAISM

A Tale of Two Mitzvahs



At the end of every Jewish worship service, our concluding prayers include the Adoration or *Aleinu*, which contains a powerful statement regarding the human partnership with God in the establishment of a perfect world to come. This messianic hope states that it is our responsibility to "perfect the world under the sovereignty of God." In Hebrew, the phrase "to perfect the world" is "*tikkun olam*."

While there may be many ways to interpret this eternal mission and many pathways to its realization, this article entitled, *A Tale of Two Mitzvahs*, will focus on two specific commandments and two remarkable members of our congregation who have employed them to perfect the world in which we live. Each of these commandments is part of the *Holiness Codes* which are read from the Torah on Yom Kippur afternoon. They come from the Book of Leviticus and shape our understanding of morality.

You shall not insult the deaf nor place a stumbling block before the blind. (Lev. 19:14)

You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor. (Lev. 19:16)

The ethics embodied by the first of these commandments helps define human decency. The second of these commandments demands accountability. Both constitute the framework for my *Tale of Two Mitzvahs*.

When Mort Fefer started recording books for the blind, he did so because it combined his deep love of math and science, his innate passion for teaching and his boundless desire to help others. In his heart, he knew that blindness should not be an impediment to learning mathematics and chemistry. So he took it upon himself to remove that stumbling block by recording audio versions of math and chemistry books for blind students.

Mort's work was more than a labor of love. It was a mitzvah. Try to imagine how complicated it would be to describe the abstract concepts found in Geometry, Calculus or Chemistry without the use of visuals. How does one describe a shape to someone who has never seen a circle or a triangle? Yet, this is exactly what Mort did, and in doing so, he took to heart the Torah's commandment regarding placing a stumbling block before the blind.

Whenever we proactively involve ourselves in repairing the world (*tikun olam*), we embrace the spirit of the second commandment mentioned above as well, for whenever we actively address an injustice, we make a conscious decision to "*not stand idly by*." In Judaism, a bystander has a moral obligation to rescue someone who is in peril. This religious obligation has parameters, but it is understood to be an ethical and legal responsibility to extend ourselves, in whatever way we can, when a fellow human is in danger.

For years, Joel Androphy (a prominent Houston defense attorney) witnessed countless court cases where inadequate legal representation led to overly harsh and often unfair punishments to African American men who could not afford to pay for decent legal counsel. On Yom Kippur afternoon in 2016, Joel had an epiphany. During the afternoon service, Pastor Harvey Clemons Jr (a Baptist minister in Houston's Fifth Ward) delivered a profoundly moving sermon on the Prophet Isaiah. In it, Pastor Clemons challenged our community to find ways to move the prayers of our hearts into positive transformation in the world.

Upon hearing the Pastor's plea, Joel refused to stand on the sidelines. He could not stand idly by while economic injustices were unfolding around him, so he immediately set up a program in conjunction with Pastor Clemons to provide top quality, pro bono legal services to young men who needed it. This program came with one stipulation for those men who chose to work with Joel. This stipulation required these young men to give their time and energy to the church in exchange for legal counsel. In just two years, the program had become so successful that it was awarded the *2018 Harris County Bench Bar Pro Bono Award* by the Houston Bar Association and the Harris County judiciary.

The commandments against "standing idly by" and "placing a stumbling block before the blind" might be considered to be among Judaism's most important directives for human decency in the world. Each definitively states that it is an admonition to take advantage of others and calls upon us to take action demanding that society and people do everything possible to help the weak, the vulnerable and the helpless. May we find guidance in these commandments and inspiration from Mort and Joel who help us see how to translate them into our lives.