

THE BUTTERFLY

Please make sure my red bear gets a good home.

*(Lisa, a Jewish communal worker,
donating one of her favorite stuffed animals during
her agency's campaign to provide for others.)*

When a butterfly flutters its wings in China, it can cause a storm in Los Angeles. That's what the 9th grade science teachers used to teach us about the physical world. The same is true with Mitzvahs: any Mitzvah, no matter how ostensibly small, changes the entire world. We learn from God's gorgeous ever-so-fragile creature: ***There is no such thing as a small Mitzvah.***

Now add some of your own examples to the following list:

1. Paul Newman gives away to Tzedakah all of the after-tax profits from the sales of his food products...more than \$100,000,000! Nevertheless, from the first 23¢ he donated, the whole world was changed for the better.

2. Elana Erdstein's Bat Mitzvah Project — collecting soaps and shampoos from hotels that people had put away in their medicine chests, drawers, and closets. She collected 25,000 of them, which she took to shelters for homeless people and for victims of domestic violence. And yet, *the very first little bottle* she delivered changed the life of the person who used it. This changed the whole world.

3. For his Bar Mitzvah, a young man collected used, out-of-service cellphones people had lying around the house because the owners had changed carriers. He gathered 75 of them, which were re-programmed to 911 emergency numbers and given free of charge to victims and potential victims of domestic violence. *The very first phone* changed the world.

4. Ray Buchanan, founder of Stop Hunger Now, had hoped to provide \$500,000 of international relief in his organization's first year of operation. As it happened, he provided \$7,500,000 worth of relief. One of our favorite aspects of his work is funding the purchase of anti-worm medicine that prevents malnutrition and possibly death for adults and children in Central America. To quote from Ray's e-mail, "The \$1500 from you translates into 30,000 doses of life-saving worm medicine with a fair market value of \$75,000!" That comes out to 5¢/dose. *One nickel* — only one step removed from the least valuable coin in America! 5¢ — a small Mitzvah? To the contrary: the Mitzvah-energy of 5¢ carries to the very ends of the universe.

5. One of Linda Tarry's Project People Foundation's many programs is the manufacture of black dolls. Beginning with unemployed women in South Africa (where these innocent objects were outlawed under Apartheid), and now including an employment program in rural Georgia, it affords the workers an opportunity to make a living. And...the dolls are distributed in many other parts of the world where they make black children happy, including Ethiopian children in Israel. Project People's workers have made thousands of them. *Every single doll* in the hands of a child offers profound warmth and comfort. *One doll*, such a small thing? To use a phrase from my Southern upbringing, "Not hardly!"

6. When pre-schoolers paint primitive designs on simple pads that they bring as *place mats* for Elders at a nursing home, is that such a small Mitzvah?

7. A letter I received in 1992:

I am sorry I can not donate any money. My husband has been laid off since Sept. and I can not give —

Your work is very important.

I am sorry.

H.S.

This *one letter* is so filled with passion! While I do not agree that the author needed to apologize, nevertheless, her words moved me then, and have guided me ever since in my own Tzedakah work.

If we keep in mind The Butterfly Principle, we will avoid a number of pitfalls:

1. There is no reason to feel guilty or have a sense of inadequacy about our own Mitzvah work. All too often when people meet Mitzvah heroes or hear stories about their Mitzvah work, they feel guilty that they have not done enough. This is not about guilt. *Every act of Tikkun Olam makes a difference.* We do whatever *we* are capable of doing.

2. Tikkun Olam is not about charisma as it is commonly understood. None of the Mitzvah heroes has any magical powers or is in any way different than we are. They are just “regular people”. Indeed, one of the basic meanings of the Greek word “charisma” is “a gracious gift [of the gods]”. Jewishly speaking, everyone has The Divine Gift. We express our gratitude by doing acts of Tikkun Olam, and every act changes the entire world for the better.

There is no such thing as a small Mitzvah.