

## Joe the Butler

---

Years ago in another one of my books, I re-told a story I had read in the newspaper. It was about a certain Joe Lejman who used to dress up as a butler and serve in a local shelter for victims of domestic violence. I thought it was a brilliant idea. The article I had read was a short blurb, so there was only one incident-moment that the reporter chose to relate. I had hoped for more, but, in retrospect, and with years to reflect, I understand the reporter's wisdom. The incident was The Incident, the one that would teach us almost everything we needed to know about Joe Lejman and his marvelous Mitzvah.

As it happened, one day, Joe had finished serving a meal for the residents, then poured the coffee. He poured for one woman, and then lit her cigarette. She began to cry. She cried because she told Joe that this was the first time she could remember that anyone had done something nice for her.

Now, years after reading that story, my mind is wandering and I am beginning to wonder —

Is it possible that this woman regained every shred of her lost self-respect because of Joe Lejman's single act of unadulterated caring and radiant goodness? It's possible.

Did she then tell the social workers she had emerged from her despair, regained her energy, and wanted to go job hunting the next day? She might have.

Did she then get a job, give the appropriate portion of her first and every subsequent paycheck to Tzedakah, do homework with her kids at night, and help get them through high school and into college? Perhaps.

Did the children then go to college, graduate, get jobs, give the appropriate percentage of their first and every subsequent paycheck to Tzedakah, and raise their families to do the same? Maybe they did.

Were the other women in that shelter so inspired by what she did that they did the same, start life all over again because of Joe Lejman? Maybe they did, too.

How many more heartbeats were added to the world's total? Billions upon billions.

How far out into the entire population of Planet Earth did the concentric circles reach because Joe Lejman, one man, got this crazy idea to be a butler in a shelter for women, who, by all reasonable possibility, should have sunk into lifelong oblivion?

Grand total, how much did Joe spend on a butler's outfit?

You save one life, you save the world.

# David Copperfield

דרש ר' שמלאי

תורה תחלתה גמילות חסדים וסופה גמילות חסדים

Rabbi Simla'i explained in a sermon:

The Torah begins and ends with acts of caring, loving kindness.

(Sotah 14a)

The meaning of man's life lies in his perfecting the universe. He has to distinguish...and redeem the sparks of holiness scattered throughout the darkness of the world.

(Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel)

From a David Copperfield website:

...for all his accomplishments, David Copperfield insists that his greatest work to date is Project Magic. He developed this rehabilitative program over a decade ago to strengthen dexterity and motor use in disabled patients by using simple sleight-of-hand magic. As Copperfield explains, "It motivates a patient's therapy and helps to build self esteem." What I like the most, though, is his statement, "*There is nothing I do that is more important.*" [My Italics.] Project Magic is currently being used in 1,000 hospitals in 30 countries around the world, from Belgium to New Zealand, Iceland to Singapore.

**The Copperfield Principle: No matter what we "do" as an occupation, we should remember that there is nothing more important than our Mitzvah work.**

I would add that, while Copperfield's talents are awesome, we *all* have absolutely unique talents. No one else in the world can do what we can do. So a corollary to The Copperfield Principle would be: **We should use our absolutely unique talents to fix the world the way absolutely nobody else can fix it.** In some situations this involves our professions, but it can also include our avocations, and even our ostensibly peripheral interests. As a consequence, we should pursue training in all areas that will expand our capabilities and horizons and allow us to use our talents and skills even more for Tikkun Olam.

# **Why You Should Go Out Today And Buy a Copy of It's a Wonderful Life**

The Joke:

*A woman walks into a very large bookstore and approaches the man standing behind the information counter. She asks, "Where is the 'Self-help' section?" The man behind the counter says, "If I told you, it would defeat the purpose."*

The Sermon:

*A certain Rabbi heard this story and said, "If there were a bigger 'Help Others' section, there wouldn't be a need for such a big 'Self-help' section."*

*Whether you have worked through one, ten, most, or all of the exercises, hopefully you will be better equipped to Fix the World in your own unique way. Before you go on to the next stage of your Tikkun Olam endeavors, read the following to set the tone for your holy work:*

Consider the inspiring speeches you have heard.

Consider President Kennedy's Inaugural Address, "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." America — the world — changed as a result of those words.

Consider how many millions of people have been inspired to work for civil rights because of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

Consider The Gettysburg Address, bane of 7<sup>th</sup> graders required to memorize it, but eloquent, awesomely so.

Consider Roosevelt's "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself" speech.

And Churchill's memorable words throughout World War II. So many quotes still move us, give us courage to fight the evils of the world, whatever form they take. "...We shall fight them on the beaches, ...we shall never surrender".

Edward R. Murrow's reports from London during the Blitz.

The topic is Tikkun Olam. Defiance, Courage, the Just Fight. Consider the music of the Sixties. Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'" moved an entire generation to protest the War in Vietnam. Tikkun Olam.

Consider, even, commercial advertising. How many people began to jog, improve their health, and live longer, better lives because of Nike's line, "Just do it"? Again, Tikkun Olam

Most of all, consider the movies, artistically superb, dreadful, or somewhere in between:

*Stand and Deliver* — Jaime Escalante, a crazy math teacher who believed that teaching calculus was the way out of the ghetto for his students.

*Music of the Heart*, the story of Roberta Guaspari — of all things, teaching violin, the violin! to students in East Harlem...their way to a better life.

*The Miracle Worker* — Who inspires us more? Helen Keller? Annie Sullivan?

*Schindler's List*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Amelie*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Erin Brockovich*.... Still more Tikkun Olam.

Perhaps the classic Jewish movie is the one played on TV 8,050 times from late November until early January, namely, Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. Jimmy Stewart is George Bailey whose life has gone terribly wrong. Standing on a bridge, ready to end it all, an angel named Clarence appears and shows him what life in his community would have been like if he hadn't lived. Clarence makes him see desolation, loneliness, so many people in desperate straits. To paraphrase the angel, "George, just look at the difference you made! There is so much more for you to do!"

Is this not *the* question, "What would life be like for so many others if you hadn't lived?"

Don't wait until next November to catch it on television. Get a copy today. Watch it, review your answers to the questions I've asked, and...just dig in and do the Tikkun Olam only you can do.

## **Why You Should Go Out Today And Buy a Copy of It's a Wonderful Life**

### **The Joke:**

*A woman walks into a very large bookstore and approaches the man standing behind the information counter. She asks, "Where is the 'Self-help' section?" The man behind the counter says, "If I told you, it would defeat the purpose."*

### **The Sermon:**

*A certain Rabbi heard this story and said, "If there were a bigger 'Help Others' section, there wouldn't be a need for such a big 'Self-help' section."*

Whether you have worked through one, ten, most, or all of the exercises, hopefully you will be better equipped to Fix the World in your own unique way. Before you go on to the next stage of your Tikkun Olam endeavors, read the following to set the tone for your holy work:

Consider the inspiring speeches you have heard.

Consider President Kennedy's Inaugural Address, "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." America — the world — changed as a result of those words.

Consider how many millions of people have been inspired to work for civil rights because of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

Consider The Gettysburg Address, bane of 7<sup>th</sup> graders required to memorize it, but eloquent, awesomely so.

Consider Roosevelt's "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself" speech.

And Churchill's memorable words throughout World War II. So many quotes still move us, give us courage to fight the evils of the world, whatever form they take. "...We shall fight them on the beaches, ...we shall never surrender".

Edward R. Murrow's reports from London during the Blitz.

The topic is Tikkun Olam. Defiance, Courage, the Just Fight. Consider the music of the Sixties. Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'" moved an entire generation to protest the War in Vietnam. Tikkun Olam.

Consider, even, commercial advertising. How many people began to jog, improve their health, and live longer, better lives because of Nike's line, "Just do it"? Again, Tikkun Olam

Most of all, consider the movies, artistically superb, dreadful, or somewhere in between:

*Stand and Deliver* — Jaime Escalante, a crazy math teacher who believed that teaching calculus was the way out of the ghetto for his students.

*Music of the Heart*, the story of Roberta Guaspari — of all things, teaching violin, the violin! to students in East Harlem...their way to a better life.

*The Miracle Worker* — Who inspires us more? Helen Keller? Annie Sullivan?

*Schindler's List*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Amelie*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, *Erin Brockovich*.... Still more Tikkun Olam.

Perhaps the classic Jewish movie is the one played on TV 8,050 times from late November until early January, namely, Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. Jimmy Stewart is George Bailey whose life has gone terribly wrong. Standing on a bridge, ready to end it all, an angel named Clarence appears and shows him what life in his community would have been like if he hadn't lived. Clarence makes him see desolation, loneliness, so many people in desperate straits. To paraphrase the angel, "George, just look at the difference you made! There is so much more for you to do!"

Is this not *the* question, "What would life be like for so many others if you hadn't lived?"

Don't wait until next November to catch it on television. Get a copy today. Watch it, review your answers to the questions I've asked, and...just dig in and do the Tikkun Olam only you can do.

# Mitzvah Shopping

---

## ***One of Wilshire Boulevard Temple's Darfur Relief Projects***

In the spring of 2005, I was invited to spend six days at Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles. It is a *very* large congregation, with more than 2,000 family units. I was invited both to lecture as well as to be a participant in several programs. Each session was a unique experience, and each was pleasant and satisfying in its own way. One program in particular stands out as something I had never experienced before in all of my 31 years of work in this field — Kids' Mitzvah Shopping Night at Costco.

The background: The congregation was about to ship a huge container of donated goods to the Darfur region of Sudan. The slaughter and suffering in Sudan has been going on for years, and, at this writing, still shows little sign of abating. The congregation had already done the most important piece of research. They had located an agency in Sudan that could assure the members that the donated goods would arrive safely and would be delivered directly to some of the thousands of Sudanese in refugee camps. Arrangements had also been made for the actual shipping of the container. All that remained was to fill it and to have it put on board the ship.

The synagogue arranged for its members to donate in one of two ways: (1) the congregation supplied cartons to any members who wanted, which the members could then fill with suggested items, or (2) they could donate money, and volunteers and staff members would purchase the items.

## ***Enter "The Kids"***

The shoppers were a recently-formed group of post-Bar and Bar Mitzvah students who would be focusing their efforts on Tikkun Olam. Months before, when Rabbi Dennis Eisner and I were reviewing my schedule, I told him I was particularly excited about this program. Even the name excited me: "Mitzvah Madness". I just *knew* that the educators would be teaching Tzedakah with great creativity.

The night the teen-agers went Mitzvah shopping, they had \$2,100 of Wilshire Boulevard's Tzedakah money at their disposal.

This was the scene at Costco: Eight students, their educators, two or three assistants, and myself as a participant, came in for a special kind of shopping spree. A few minutes before, one of the educators talked to the manager about what we were planning to do; he kindly offered us a big lawn table and chairs in the middle of the store so we could sit together and talk as a group.

## ***Money, Money — The Counting of the \$100 Bills***

Until this point, the kids did not know exactly *how much* money they had to spend. The educators explained the program, including a basic list of what kinds of items were needed, and what could and could not be shipped more than half way around the world to Sudan. Then one of the leaders took out twenty-one \$100 bills and counted it out right in front of them. The kids' eyes lit up, and the buzz and chatter began. It felt like a younger version of a family's first reaction when it finds that out one of its members just won the lottery. Sometimes money does that to kids, just like it does when they are older and Big Money suddenly becomes part of their lives.

The truth is, though, I could tell that they already began to “get it”. Deep in their gut they knew that this was not *their* money, not then, not in a half hour, never. It was Mitzvah money that would buy critically-needed items for utterly-despairing people living in a nightmare. Even before they put their hands on big shopping carts, I knew that not one of them imagined that a single penny of this was for themselves.

They proved it once they began pulling huge quantities of merchandise off of the shelves. And they proved it to themselves.

### ***Up and Down the Aisles***

Some more details: We broke up into three groups of two or three students and a staff member or two, in case there were questions. Let me make it clear, though — it was the teen-agers who ultimately made the choices, put their own hands on the merchandise, and put it in the carts. Now and again they might ask each other or a staff member whether product X or Y was appropriate since it hadn’t been specifically listed among the recommended items. I was particularly struck when one of them looked at the brooms and suggested that they put a bunch of them in the cart. One of the group responded by describing what a refugee camp must be like — tents, no real floors, just dirt, and the like — and that brooms weren’t necessary. It was a stunning moment. Kids, most of them so-called “privileged” children, kids talking High Tzedakah to each other, “getting” it.

### ***Checking out***

While one of the staff took care of check-out, the rest of us then had some time to discuss what we had just experienced. As we reviewed the activity, I remember thinking again, “*Never once* did they think that this money was for themselves. Not a nickel of it.” I was also impressed that had these kids been shopping for themselves, they could have easily spent all of the money. Many, but not all, of them are from well-to-do families and quite possibly wouldn’t even flinch at spending \$500 or \$1,000. It was clear, though, that they had really learned the difference between “*shopping shopping*” and “*Mitzvah shopping*”. There is one thing, though, that they didn’t “get”. They had succeeded in spending only about \$1,550. They were new at Mitzvah shopping on such a grand scale, and couldn’t get used to the fact that they could have bought 20 of some items instead of a dozen, or 50 instead of 30. But that will come with time as they grow up, earn their own money, and begin to do Tzedakah with their own resources.

When it was all over that evening, we filled a huge van with the purchases. On Sunday, it would be loaded into the container which would be picked up later in the week. Then, it would be put on the ship to work its way, so far away, to the refugee camps. In fact, by Sunday, it was already evident that the temple would need a second container because the congregants had donated so much.

It was quite an evening, and a few days later, quite an afternoon working with congregants to load up carton after carton of Tzedakah items for people they would never meet but who were, in some very intimate way, part of their lives.