

“A Hand of Loving Kindness”
Sarah Abramson, Ph.D
Temple Aliyah Sisterhood Shabbat
January 25, 2014

Often, when I pick up the phone in my office, I hear a dial-tone. The call to Yad Chessed is a difficult one—a call it takes a great number of people many attempts to make. When we do connect, there is shame on the other end of the line. But more than shame, there is an immense fear of judgment. Amy, a client of ours who is a single mother after losing her husband to a brain aneurysm and who is herself struggling with MS, wrote to me: ‘Sarah, when I first tried to call, I hung up nine times. I was crying too much. I had already lost my job, my health, my husband. I could not lose my pride. Admitting to my own community that I can’t even feed my children sometimes felt like too much’.

Yad Chessed is an emergency financial assistance organization. We help Jewish people in Boston with basic needs—food, clothing, shelter, utilities and the like—people who are under extreme economic stress. Last year, we assisted 633 Jewish families with nearly half a million dollars- worth of financial assistance. Over 75% of our clients were living on \$2,000 or less a month; \$24,000 for a family of four in Greater Boston does not get you very far. We are a staff of four—myself, two part-time social workers and a part-time administrator—and yet, with every call, with

every call for help, we prioritize dignity. In practice, this means that we choose to give cards rather than gifts in kind. We want our clients to have the dignifying experience of choice.

633 families (out of an estimated population in need of over 20,000 families, according to recent research done by Bridgespan Consulting Firm for CJP)— and our relationship with all of them began with one phone call, which too many described as humiliating. Six hundred and thirty-three Jewish families received funds for food, for shelter, for utilities, for clothes last year. Six hundred and thirty three families called us, in incredible distress, and thanks to the generosity of our donors, people in this sanctuary today, these families were given a lifeline.

Yad Chessed—“hand of loving kindness”—uses donations from individuals and foundations to extend a loving hand from the community as a whole to those friends, neighbors and family members of ours who need immediate financial help the most.

The 633 families come to us from all walks of life—secular, religious, young, old, immigrants, native Bostonians. Our clients only share three commonalities: they are Jewish, they are in financial distress, and they come to us feeling a great amount of isolation from a community which many people regard as immune from the social ill of poverty. They feel like strangers in their own community. They feel

like poverty, all too familiar to them, remains a stranger to the minds of Jewish people in this town. Jews know poverty as an issue of “the other”... “other” as in part of our past but not part of our present, or “other” as different from us altogether. This othering of poverty helps to isolate our clients even further.

The Jewish community in Boston is not immune. And our poverty is not different from ‘their’ poverty. The poor in the Jewish community correspond to the poor in the community at large. We are not different. What we hope **is** different is our response to the poverty amongst our people.

On Tuesday, Rabbi Perkins sent me a dvar on this week’s passage by Rabbi Shai Held. The parallels to what I planned to speak about were uncanny, and I like to acknowledge when others more wise than I can sum something up better than I ever could. So I quote from him:

In Parashat Mishpatim we read: *“You shall not oppress a stranger (ger), for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.”*¹ *By ger, the Torah means one who is an alien in the place where he lives—that is, one who is not a member of the ruling tribe or family, who is not a citizen, and who is therefore vulnerable to social and economic exploitation. The Torah appeals to our memory to intensify our ethical obligations: having tasted the suffering and degradation to which vulnerability can lead, we are bidden not to*

oppress the stranger. The Torah's call is not based on a rational argument, but on an urgent demand for empathy: since you know what it feels like to be a stranger, you must never abuse or mistreat the stranger.

So we are told today, as Jews, to reach out to the stranger. But what happens when the stranger is not so strange? We *know* them, but they *feel* strange still. When the stranger is our friend, our family, our neighbor—our congregant. Or what happens when the strange **issue** of poverty, an issue we have collectively worked for generations to distance ourselves from-- is not so strange for thousands of Jewish families in our own backyard?

Yad Chessed clients are newborns, and great grandparents. They are high school drop-outs and PhDs. Yad Chessed clients are single, divorced and widowed. They have no children; their children are in primary school, high school, college and are young adults living at home. Yad Chessed clients are healthy in mind and body or weak and ill. They are angry, and they are accepting. They are observant Jews and they have not been to shul in fifty years. They have caused their own crises, made mistakes and taken risks. They are the victims of circumstances outside of their control. In good economic times some can get by. Leaner times are catastrophic for them.

And they all call us with a great amount of shame. Yad Chessed clients are, tragically, bound together by what they perceive as the dearth of community that surrounds them in their need. Many have no family, are outcasts from family, or have had to distance themselves from family. The ones with healthy family ties have family with no financial means to assist. They are lonely and they are frightened. They remain invisible. They sit next to you in shul, or you pass them in the hallway at school, but you do not recognize them or their need. While some clients are referred to us by their rabbis, others have not told anyone of their crisis. They are too humiliated to ask. It is not unusual for families to come to us when the situation is so far advanced that we cannot step in to forestall foreclosure and avoid homelessness.

Yad Chessed is a financial crisis organization. But our first job is to let our clients know that they are strangers no longer because as Jews we have a shared responsibility for our cumulative fate—that if my fellow friend, neighbor, Jew is suffering from economic distress, I too feel that suffering and work to combat it as my own. Our goal is for each client to part ways with us filled with a renewed sense of belief that is two-fold: firstly, a belief in themselves—that despite death, drugs, divorce, job loss, trauma, cancer, mental illness or sheer bad luck—that they themselves are worthy of feeling life as a productive member of society AND of our Jewish community. We use financial assistance to buy shelter, food, clothing,

utilities—and the security we purchase helps people buy back into a sense of hope and optimism about their own future.

Secondly, we work to reaffirm a belief in the Jewish community. Although clients often come to us in anger and despair, and sometimes lash out at us, we understand that desperation colors their action. We treat everyone with *kavod*, (honor or respect) and with every conversation and action, we attempt to restore their sense of self- worth and respect. We hold out hope. They tell us they cannot speak to people who know them, and come to us because they have heard we will treat them with kindness. We tell them there is no shame in asking for assistance. It is a mitzvah to give, and the kehillah (the Jewish community) has funded Yad Chessed so that we can give to them in their time of need. Amy, the client I spoke about in the beginning, ended her note to me: “The call to Yad Chessed saved my life, precisely because it restored my dignity. They money was important, but the self-belief will be what I really gained. I have never felt like I have more to contribute”.

When the financial crisis has hopefully been averted, we then help our clients take the first steps back towards self-sustainability, when at all possible. We budget together. We refer to other Jewish and non- Jewish agencies for work placement help, resume help, and mental health counselling. But we do not let go of their hand.

Yad Chessed currently gives out \$20,000 worth of emergency assistance **every month**, and another \$15,000 worth of food cards **a month** goes to the 130 or so most vulnerable families in our community for whom the end of *every* month is a food emergency [Thirty thousand dollars a month and we are only helping a small proportion of the community that may need help]. We help for as long as needed, as long as we can. And sometimes we succeed, and sometimes we fail, but we do not give up on our mission to restore dignity through economic stability.

As this is Sisterhood Shabbat, I want to share two stories from two mothers...

First, is an instance where we were unable to help—the need was too great. Even in this case, we were able to restore some dignity.

The second is an example of our ability to truly make a life-altering impact, provided people know about us and come to us in time.

Story one:

Email from mother:

Thank you for taking the time to consider our application for assistance and for taking the time to talk to me. I understand the difficulties with our case and we appreciate all your efforts to help us.

As I felt the crushing weight of an imminent eviction, the painful consequences of

failing to qualify for assistance from other agencies, a phone call from our 7 year old daughter's teacher about her poem jolted me back. Our daughter wrote she loved us, needed us and she feels a lot of pain. "I am sad, hopeless and a failure. I cannot help my parents. I hate myself and I love my brother who has a brain injury but he gets so much attention. I want to go swimming in the Charles River and never come back." She told her teacher, " My mommy does so many things for me and I cannot help her."

I do not want my daughter to feel this way. Obviously, I have not shielded her from what is going on and I dropped the ball here.

Housing is out of reach for us now and we realize we will be evicted 72 hours after the execution of the eviction on October 31st. Our efforts to prevent the eviction fell short. We can however do something about our children's mental health and plan to continue to focus on their education and therapies as productive environments for them. I know you have worked very hard to help my family, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. We are still in trouble, but we no longer feel abandoned.

Thank you so much for doing everything you could to help!

Email from Mother:

My family may have had its difficulties, but life was as normal as it is for everyone--except that we had both the greatest challenge and the greatest love of our life in one--our oldest child who has autism.

I had a thriving home business [daycare business for kids]. When my autistic child hurt one of my other children and the police became involved, I was forced to close my business. Within days, life became a nightmare. [No more grilled cheese sandwiches, story and nap times.] My husband continued to work full time but it was nowhere near enough. When I packed lunch for my kids, I didn't quite have enough for them to eat. Everything about me is normal, and I would stand at my counter in disbelief. I could not feed my children enough.

We fell behind on our mortgage. The stress was all consuming and I couldn't concentrate on the safety of all of my children, the mortgage and other bills, and my husband who was working non-stop and never catching up. I couldn't do that all and find a job too.

And then I found out about Yad Chessed. Yad Chessed allowed me to cry, to feel the pain. And then they literally gave me my life back. They motivated me to stop crying.

Yad Chessed's generosity paid our mortgage up-to-date. You stopped foreclosure on our home. Yad Chessed then networked me to other organizations--holding my

hand the whole time. I know they help hundreds of people, but you should know that they made me feel like it was just me. They got me resume help. They got me to a place with more services for my son. They got me counseling just for me.

They paid my mortgage, and I am now able to pay it forward to my family. I will always miss childcare but I have a good job again and when I pack my children's lunches, they are now full. They have slept securely in our small but loving home. We are up-to-date on our bills.

We would have become homeless if not for Yad Chessed. But we are not. Thank you doesn't even express my gratitude, but I see the meaning of the help every day in my children's faces.

As mothers, or children or friends of mothers, we cannot rest until we know our children are sleeping in a warm home with full bellies. Please talk about this issue—it is the first thing we can all do to acknowledge those who feel like strangers in our own community. Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.