Parshas Vayeshev "Josh and Margot"

Camp Stone is a Jewish summer camp located in Pennsylvania. It is affiliated with Bnei Akiva, a Religious Zionist youth movement. Have you heard of the 'Stone Chumash'? The camp, which began operations in 1969, and the Chumash, are named after the Jewish philanthropist Irving I. Stone, a long time executive at American Greetings. Mr. Stone purchased the 400 acre site of a former camp to establish an Orthodox Jewish summer camp. The camp encourages aliyah, or emigration to Israel. It was at Camp Stone that Margot and Josh met in the summer of 2009.

Josh and Margot immediately became friends, and within two years started dating. Their relationship lasted another two years, but they weren't ready to take the next step, and soon broke up.

Sounds like a fairly typical story, doesn't it? Boy meets girl. Boy dates girl. Boy and girl break up. Boy and girl then go on for years in the difficult world of dating, looking for their b'shert (soulmate). What has Hashem been doing since Creation? Jewish tradition teaches that He has been involved in making shidduchim (matches) -- .and apparently, He hasn't been having an easy time of it.

The Midrash relates that a Roman matron once asked a rabbi what the Almighty has been doing since creating the heavens and earth. The rabbi responded, "Making matches." The matron said, "That's all? I can do that." She proceeded with a Yenta-like experiment, ordering 1000 of her male servants to marry 1000 female servants. The next morning, disaster was evident all around - a bruise here, a cut there, broken limbs and black eyes. She asked them, "What happened?" This one said, "I don't want him" and that one said, "I don't want her". And the matron had to admit that there was no G-d like the G-d of Israel for truth.

To match couples together is as difficult for G-d as the splitting of the Red Sea, the Talmud says. If creating matches is difficult for the Almighty, how can people hope for success in finding a life partner? Additionally, in areas of life's many challenges -- money, health, family -- how can we move forward in the face of difficulty, while simultaneously not feeling sorry for ourselves?

A secret for success in meeting life's challenges can be found in this week's parsha.

Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers for no apparent reason other than he told them of his dreams. He was the target of seduction by the wife of his Egyptian master. What was Joseph's reward for maintaining his values and integrity in the face of almost impossible temptation? He was thrown into the deepest, darkest hole in Egypt, and then had the key thrown away. If ever a person had a right to feel sorry for himself it was Joseph.

Yet Joseph did not feel sorry for himself. Far from it. In the midst of his tzuris, his primary concern was for others. In this week's Torah portion, he notices the pain of Pharaoh's baker and butler and reaches out to them.

The Talmud tells us: Afeelu cherev chada munachat al tzavero shel adam, al yimna atzmo min harachameem. Even when a sharp sword rests on your neck, don't give up on mercy. The standard explanation of this phrase is that even when a situation looks as bleak as can be, don't give up hoping for G-d's mercy. Redemption can arrive in the blink of an eye.

However, a careful look at the wording of this Talmudic call for trust and hope reveals an additional prescription for Divine mercy.

An Auschwitz survivor said that when she was in the camps, she often contemplated that the Hebrew in the phrase can be read to mean, "Even if a drawn sword is at your neck, don't give up on being merciful." Don't become so self-involved that you forget there are others around you in pain, too. When entrenched within one's problems, it's so easy to feel that you are the only person in the world with difficulties. It's easy to become so self-absorbed that you unwittingly become selfish and uncaring.

We all have problems, some of us more than others. It takes strength and courage to overcome them. But personal problems should not be an excuse to stop caring about others. Circumstances may rob you of many things, but when you stop caring about others, you run the risk of relinquishing your humanity.

The converse is also true: When you care about others, amazing things happen.

Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds was captured with thousands of others in the Battle of the Bulge in late 1944 and spent 100 days in captivity. The Wehrmacht had a strict anti-Jew policy and segregated Jewish POWs from non-Jews. On the eastern front, captured Jewish soldiers in the Russian army had been sent to extermination camps.

So when the German camp commander, speaking in English, ordered the Jews to identify themselves, Edmonds knew what was at stake. Turning to the rest of the POWs, he said: “We are not doing that, we are all falling out."

With all the camp’s inmates defiantly standing in front of their barracks, the German commander turned to Edmonds and said: “They cannot all be Jews.” To which Edmonds replied: “We are all Jews here.” Then the Nazi officer pressed his pistol to Edmonds head and offered him one last chance. Edmonds merely gave him his name, rank and serial number as required by the Geneva Conventions.

And then -- as recounted by witnesses -- Edmonds said, "If you are going to shoot, you are going to have to shoot all of us because we know who you are and you’ll be tried for war crimes when we win this war."

The German officer then withdrew

Seventy years later -- last week -- the Knoxville, Tennessee, native was posthumously recognized with Israel’s highest honor for non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during World War II. Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds was the first American serviceman to earn the honor at Yad Vashem in Israel as a 'Righteous Among the Nations.'

Why? Because he cared about others.

I began today's remarks with a story about Josh and Margot, and how after dating for a few years they broke up. The story didn't end at that point, however. In fact, that's when their story -- at least, the good part -- really began.

The summer before the break-up, on one of Camp Stone's trips to Hershey Park, Josh and Margot stopped off at a shul in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to eat lunch. As they left the shul, Josh left his bag there. The bag sat in the shul for the next three years, and Josh soon forgot about it.

Shortly after that summer, Margot and Josh broke up, completely lost contact and moved on in their lives. Margot went to Israel for a year to pursue her master's degree at Hebrew University. Josh graduated college and enrolled at Yeshiva University. Margot started dating, as did Josh. But no one 'felt right' for either of the two.

And then one day a package showed up at Margot's house. It was Josh's backpack. The rabbi of the shul in Harrisburg, Rabbi Akiva Males, had discovered the backpack while cleaning for Pesach -- three years after Josh had left it there on that trip with Camp Stone. (I'll have to ask my esteemed colleague Rabbi Males why he didn't find the backpack the first year he was cleaning for Pesach!) The only identification Rabbi Males could find was on a postcard inside the backpack. The postcard was from Margot, and it contained her return address. In a caring, outstanding act of hashavas aveidah (fulfillment of the mitzvah of returning a lost object), the rabbi mailed the bag to Margot's house with a note attached explaining how he found it.

It took Margot a few minutes to figure out whose bag was inside this mysterious package. But when she realized it was Josh's, she did something she hadn't done in three years - she texted him. "Hey Josh," she wrote, "funny story- I received a package that was meant for you. If you want, you can come pick it up."

So he did. Josh went over to Margot's house, and they greeted each other for the first time in three years. Slowly they went through the contents of the bag, and reminisced. They filled each other in on what they had been up to. It was a lovely conversation, one that apparently was long overdue. The next day Josh asked her out.

Five months later Josh bought Margot a ring and asked her to marry him in the exact same spot he had first asked her out five years earlier. She found the same bag that came in the package; inside was a ring, and a note that said, "Will you marry me?"

After celebrating with family and friends, Josh and Margot took the time to call the rabbi from Harrisburg to thank him for his caring and tremendous act of hashavas aveidah that brought them back together. It was a 'Return of a Lost Object' on two levels. First, the rabbi had returned the bag to its proper owner. But it was much more than that: After three years of being lost, he had returned Josh and Margot to each other.

Afeelu cherev chada munachat al tzavero shel adam, al yimna atzmo min harachameem. Even when a sharp sword rests on your neck, don't give up on mercy,

Joseph, even in the deepest pit in Egypt, cared about those who were with him. A special lady said that even in Auschwitz, she made sure she cared about others, that she was merciful and loving. If there ever was a place where a sharp sword was at one's neck, it was Auschwitz. Yet she didn't forget that she was not the only one in pain.

Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds cared about others. And so did Rabbi Akiva Males.

We, who perhaps have much blunter swords at our necks, can learn from these examples. Don't give up on caring. For there are few greater expressions of humanity than thinking of others while in the midst of one's own pain and struggles. And not only does caring make us better human beings ....but it can make miracles happen.