

Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ

Happiness is a funny thing: The more you share it, the more of it you have. Inspired by the 2011 documentary "Happy", one Iowa woman opted to celebrate her 34th birthday with 34 acts of kindness, hoping to spread happiness by helping others. "Me, if I can do it, then anybody can do it," Katie Jones said, adding that she hopes that people think about "how that would change the dynamics of our own community, if people were just taking care of each other."

Katie left a bag of quarters at a local laundromat. Dropped a \$5 bill on the floor at the dollar store. Stocked the baby changing area at a local Target with disposable wipes. Handed out Subway restaurant gift cards to homeless people. And thanked firefighters with boxes of chocolates. And along with each anonymous act of kindness, she left a handmade calling card, urging others to pay it forward. "Hi, my name is Katie," the card read. "In celebration of my 34th birthday, I'm doing 34 acts of kindness. Enjoy the kindness and try to pass kindness along in your own way." Katie shelled out about \$300 on her kindness campaign since her birthday on May 16, but says it was money well spent. "We are all connected," she said. "You don't need to be part of an organization or anything beyond personal motivation."

The Torah teaches that one of the three pillars upon which the world stands is acts of human kindness. G-d created us in order to give us good. The world was designed such that the greatest good is to give to others and to be other-centered. We can all act like Katie Jones if we understand that we are all connected.

Parshas Matos -- Masei Numbers 30:2 - 36:13

In the first of this week's two action-packed portions, Moses teaches the rules and restrictions governing oaths and vows. Promises are serious business. When we say that we plan to do something -- even something as simple as, 'I'll call you later' -- we're bound by our words. Anticipating entrance into the land of Israel, the tribes of Gad and Reuben petition Moses to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan River because that land is particularly suitable for grazing their cattle. Moses, not wanting to 'steer' Gad and Reuben wrong, grants their request on the condition that they first help the rest of the nation in conquering the entire land of Israel before returning to settle their inheritance.

Masei (a word that means 'journeys') begins with a listing of the 42 encampments of the Jewish people's 40 year journey from the Exodus until the crossing of the Jordan River into the Land of Israel. The boundaries of the Land of Israel are defined. Since the Levites would not be receiving a regular portion of the land, 48 cities are set aside for them. Cities of refuge are established; one who unintentionally murders can flee there. So ends the book of Numbers, the fourth of the Books of the Torah. Next week -- on to Deuteronomy!

Rabbinic Ruminations

" A liberal and a conservative walk into a laundry detergent aisle .." That sentence could be the opening line of an odd joke -- or from an abstract on human behavior. In a new study published in the journal *Psychological Science*, a stark difference between liberals and conservatives was reported when it comes to favoring well established brands, like Tide and Coca-Cola, over new generic products. Furthermore, research from New York University's Stern School of Business suggests that a relationship exists between voting behavior, high levels of religiosity, and "seemingly inconsequential product choices."

Researchers used a database to track weekly store sales of thousands of products and calculate the market share of generics in 26 categories, including coffee, deodorant and peanut butter. They then used data from the Association of Religion Data Archives to determine the percentage of residents of various counties who fully adhered to a particular faith and those who regularly attended services. Finally, to assess political affiliation, the researchers used the average percentage of Republican votes cast in eight recent presidential elections. The results: greater religiosity was strongly associated with a lower market share for generic products. While the study doesn't prove the cliché that 'liberals shop at Trader Joe's and conservatives prefer Wal-Mart', it does provide strong evidence to suggest areas with higher levels of religiosity and Republican voting are associated with a higher reliance on national brands and lower purchase of generics.

Our beliefs are potent because they drive behavior. While degrees of Jewish education and observance vary widely among individual Jews, here are some basic tenets of Judaism that most Jews accept in some fashion: There exists only One G-d, every person is created in His image, the land of Israel is part of our worldview, and that the Torah -- a book of instructions for ethical living -- is our most important text. But how can we know what we truly believe? By looking at how we live our life, the choices we make, and our behavior.

Quote of the Week

A truly happy person is one who can enjoy the scenery on a detour. -- Author Unknown

Joke of the Week

Melvin Finkel, passing through Texas for a short business trip, checked into a rooming house in a frontier town. To avoid seeming conspicuous, he dressed himself in western attire and went to the only saloon in town. Suddenly, Melvin was surrounded by gruff men in cowboy clothes wearing six shooters. He ordered a beer. While sipping his beer and trying to be as inconspicuous as possible the biggest burliest, scroungiest looking specimen walked in and proclaimed, "Ah, hears there is a Jew in here!" Melvin cringed, and said nothing. "Ah know you're in here and you better speak up," says the western man. Melvin knew that sooner or later he would have to face up to him and accept the consequences of being Jewish, especially in such a remote place. Melvin stood up, swallowed hard, and exclaimed, " I AM A JEW!"

The westerner stared at him angrily, "What are you hiding for? Come with me, we need you for a minyan."

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We are a community at Nusach Hari B'nai Zion, dedicated to outreach and to the inclusion of all Jews. As such we strongly encourage you to be a part of our social media presence. Along with email, Facebook and Twitter are the new "word of mouth." If you are already a member of either one, please join us there. In addition, it's essential that you encourage your family and friends to follow us on Facebook and Twitter. The more people who join us as a part of our social media conversation, the more people we have an opportunity to reach.

To join us on Facebook go to <http://bit.ly/dtIoA4> and click the "Like" button.
To follow us on Twitter go to <http://twitter.com/NHBZ> and click "Follow."
To follow Rabbi Smason go to <http://twitter.com/pepshortand> and click "Follow."

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Everything Jewish in St. Louis - including Rabbi Smason's column, community events, news, commentary and features for Jews of all ages - can be found on our community website, www.JewishinStLouis.org This website is a service of the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and features columns from St. Louis Rabbis and community members.

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Comments, questions, requests to be added to our email list or better jokes can be sent to pepshort613@gmail.com. Care to know more about Nusach Hari Bnai Zion Congregation? Check us out at www.nhbz.org If you enjoyed Beyond Twelve Gates, please share with a friend. Thanks to Alan Haber for his assistance in distributing BTG.