

You and I – We Can Change the World

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Rabbi Stephen Weiss

B'nai Jeshurun Congregation, Pepper Pike OH

One Rosh Hashanah, before the blowing of the shofar, Elijah the prophet appeared to Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk accompanied by an old man. They told Rabbi Elimelekh that because humanity's sins were so great, the entire world was in jeopardy of being destroyed. It was only in the merit of two people that the world was being spared.

When Rabbi Elimelekh heard this news, he asked Elijah, "Who is this old man with you?" Elijah responded, "This is our father Abraham." Then Rabbi Elimelekh asked "Well, who are the two people for whose sake the world is being saved?" And Elijah replied, "One of them is Rabbi Shmelka of Nikolsburg." "Who is the other?" asked Rabbi Elimelekh." Elijah responded, "There's no need for you to know this also."

After Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Elimelekh traveled to Nikolsburg to share the news with Rabbi Shmelka. When Rabbi Shmelka opened the door for his guest, he said to him, "Do you know? If it wasn't for you and me the world would have been destroyed!" That's how Rabbi Elimelekh found out that in fact it was he himself who was the second tzaddik for whose sake the world was saved!

I love this story because it speaks to the power we have to shape the world around us. There are times when, like Rabbi Shmelka, we are aware of the impact of what we do. And there are times when, like Rabbi Elimelekh, we are utterly unaware. Yet at every moment, aware or not, each one of us has a profound and lasting effect on those with whom we interact. Our words and our deeds can raise up or tear down, they can hurt or heal, create rifts or harmony.

You know there is this beautiful Hassidic concept of the *lamed-vavniks*: 36 totally righteous people for whose sake at any moment the world is preserved. And the beautiful thing is, according to this tradition, no one knows who they are. Not even the *lamed-vavniks* themselves.

There is a beautiful poem by Danny Siegal, based on a Yiddish proverb, that I often quote:

If you would just imagine that the person sitting next to you on the bus was the messiah
Waiting for some simple human kindness before he reveals himself
You would soon come to weigh your words and watch your hands
And if it so happened that in your life time he did not reveal himself
It would not matter.

It would not matter because in treating everyone you meet as the messiah, with love and kindness and respect, you would in fact bring the time of the Messiah closer. In our tradition, it is we as human beings that have to bring the time of the Messiah. We do that through engaging in acts of kindness that help repair our world.

So this is my prayer for each of us as we begin this new year. It is the words God spoke to Abraham: Be a blessing.

May we be a blessing to all that we know and to all that we meet. May we see the Divine spirit in others and in ourselves. May we respond to every moment, every person with forgiveness, kindness and love. And in doing so may we merit God's love and a world redeemed. Shanah Tovah.