

“Intentionally Blessing the World”

Hans von Pechmann is a name that you likely do not know. But I wanted to tell you about him, because our world would not exist as we know it today were it not for him. Born in 1850 in Nurnberg, Germany, Hans became a brilliant scientist in the field of chemistry. He taught at the Universities of Munich and Tubingen, and he was the first to discover Diazomethane, CH_2N_2 , the simplest diazo compound, used today in a number of scientific processes. He developed methods in chemistry that still bear his name today, including the Pechmann Pyrazole Synthesis still used in medicines today.

And it was during this work, after his discovery of Diazomethane, that he stumbled upon his greatest achievement. During experiments in 1898, or by some accounts 1899, Hans von Pechmann noticed a waxy, white substance at the bottom of his test tube. But he chalked it up to some error and didn't notice that he had just discovered polythene, aka polyethylene, which you and I know of today as plastic.

Without Hans' groundbreaking accident, who knows when we would have first encountered the material that is used today in toys, cars, cellphones, computers, straws, bags, sporting equipment, packaging, and more.

While it took another 34 years for Hans' colleagues and other chemists to realize that that substance was immensely valuable. Hans von Pechmann joined the list of those who, while they had good intentions, discovered an unexpected outcome that changed the course of history.

This phenomenon, isn't new for us, and it isn't new for the Jewish people. Four of our teens just read our Torah portion, a moment in which Abraham did the same.

When God came to Abraham, Abraham's initial response was *hineni*- I am here. Abraham was paying attention.

And then God told Abraham to take his son and sacrifice him. How did Abraham respond? *He got up early the next morning*. The Talmud¹ and many of our commentaries say that this means Abraham was eager. Abraham was enthusiastic to fulfill God's bequest.

A few thousand years later, we can pick a part the object of Abraham's intentions. Thankfully, we do not sacrifice our children today, nor have we since before the time of Abraham. But

¹ Pesachim 4a; Rashi; etc.

according to our tradition, it is clear that Abraham believed his intentions were good. Abraham believed that he was doing what was best.

And so, Abraham continued with God's instructions. Only at the last second, with the *ma'achelet* - the dagger- in the air, with the intervention of an angel, was the sacrifice stopped. Abraham, because he believed so much in what he was doing, was unable to stop himself. It took a literal act of God to stop him with his intention.

As we know, Abraham's plan did change. And instead of sacrificing his son, Abraham was given a different sacred task and earned God's blessing. This blessing reads: "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."²

Abraham discovered a positive outcome, different than originally intended, that benefits us and will continue to benefit our world.

This blessing is one we strive to hold true to today: a growing people, small but mighty, who survive against all odds, who flourish in the face of difficulties, all because of our ability to hear God's purpose for us.

For thousands of years, at the heart of our tradition, the Jewish people have been tasked with continuing this blessing and hearing God's voice in Torah. We are cultivating morals and virtues with our tradition at the center. We love our neighbors, we visit the sick, we try to do what is right, and no, we don't sacrifice our children.

But we also can't forget that God says in this blessing:

וְהִתְבָּרַכְתֶּם בְּזֶרְעֵךְ כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ

And you will bless all the nations of the Earth with your offspring...We, by being descendants of Abraham, are the blessing.

And I believe that all of us try to be that blessing for as many people as we can as often as possible. We complete community service hours. We care for our friends when they need us. We give our time and money to causes and people in need.

But I want to push all of us, as we enter this New Year to do more. And while showing up is important, it isn't everything. Our blessing can be so much more when we give our actions a deep intention, when we take on an attitude of more than we ever thought possible.

I want to perform an experiment with everyone here:

² Genesis 22:18

-Everyone in this room should partner with their family or a friend or two nearby. If you are to my left, I want you to think of a bad thing that happened to you this past year. Think of one of the worst things this year. If you are to my right, I want you to think of the best thing that happened to you this year. Think of one thing that was a highlight of your past year. Take a few moments.

<<5 seconds>>

Now, with your family or partners, I will give you 30 seconds to think of all the uses of paperclips that you can come up with. Keep track using your fingers and toes, and at the end, we will see who is able to come up with the most.

<<30 seconds>>

Raise your hands if you came up with 5 uses. 10 uses. 15 uses. 20 uses...

According to the original study, done with a stricter set of conditions than what we attempted, those on the right side of the room, who were exposed to the happiest thought of the past year, should come up more uses for a paperclip than the left side of the room, who were triggered with their negative moment.

Psychology and Neuroscience say that when we approach activities with this positive mindset we are more creative, we are more eager to participate, we are more likely to enjoy our work, and we have a greater ability to do more. So what can this intention look like?

Again, we turn inwards to our tradition to offer an answer for our lives' biggest questions.

The Talmud states: Rav Preida once had a student that had to be taught something 400 times before he could understand it. One day, the Rebbe was asked to do a mitzvah, and the student failed to learn the lesson. "Why is it different today than all other days?" he asked his student. "Because," the student answered, "from the moment the master was asked to do the mitzvah I was distracted, thinking to myself, 'Soon the master will have to get up . . . Soon the master will have to get up . . .'" Rav Preida said, "If that is so, let me teach the lesson to you again." He then repeated the teaching another 400 times, and because of this a heavenly voice called out to Rav Preida, "Which reward do you want? Either you can have those 400 lessons worth of time back, adding them onto your life, or you and your generation can merit The World-to-Come?" He answered, "I request that I and my generation merit The World-to-Come." To this God responded, "Give him both rewards!

This is a 2,000 year old story about seeking to get the most out of every situation. We all know that there are moments in your life where you might say: "I'll never get that time back." For some, the last few minutes that I have been speaking may be a prime example. But we can't get that time back. We can seek a way to develop meaning from every task that we do.

For example, as Jews, we feel obligated to visit the sick. But visiting the sick isn't, "I'm going to go for three minutes, say hi, and then leave." What was your purpose while visiting the sick? Was it to provide comfort? Was it to apologize for causing them harm? Was it to give a break to a loved one who had been there for days? Whatever your reason, we don't visit the sick for a couple minutes and then imagine that our work is complete.

A second example: A few weeks ago, I was talking with a teen in our community. This teen said that they had helped with one of our events for Kids Meals. Kids Meals is a non-profit organization that delivers bagged lunches to preschool-aged children who are not in a public school program, which would qualify them for meal assistance. This teen, as a part of larger conversation about some future projects, innocently said that they've already done that program before, implying that they had learned what they could have learned from it. And so I responded: yes, we made 1,000 meals that month. And 1,000 children were able to eat the next day. Which is awesome. But what about the day after? And the day after? Kids Meals needs thousands of meals of every day.

A final example: Years ago, our school systems began requiring community service hours. Initially, this was to encourage our teens see themselves as citizens of the world. "Committed to direct human service and active involvement in community development, {our teens} have much to offer our neighbors and are keenly aware of how much our neighbors have to teach them." Today, the conversation about our community service hours is often lowering this beautiful, Divine task to the heap of other required inconveniences life gives to our teens. Like all intelligent people, when tasked with a required inconvenience, some now search for the most efficient way to accomplish the most hours, seeking avenues that stray far from the purpose of the original task.

These three examples that I have given **are failures of our desire to make a difference in our world and in the lives of others.** Our tradition has ingrained in us a desire to make our world better. We need to discover and cultivate that inner drive, and we need to be at our best as often as we can. We need to find our own personal, positive outcome that benefits us and will continue to benefit our world. Our world needs our strength in compassion, our endless caring, and the voices of our young people to lead us.

Seven months ago, when a gunman killed 17 in Parkland, Florida, we saw the emergence of a strong, passionate, educated, teen voice. These teens of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, decided that they were not going to let the rest of the world mindlessly continue in the aftermath of their shooting.

These teens went to work, using the momentary soapbox given to those who suffers through a school shooting. They became educated on policies and politics. They became national spokespeople for their cause, and they leveraged their privilege to gain access and pool resources. One month later, an estimated 800,000 marched in Washington, including teens from this community. Hundreds of thousands more marched worldwide. They have moved the

national conversation around gun safety further and faster than at any other time in recent history.

Teens, never has our world been more ready for you to be more intentional. In a world that feels like it lacks the arc of moral courage bending towards justice, there is no time like the present for new leaders to step into that void. The success of the March for our Lives, regardless of your thoughts on the political goals they seek, proves that one person, working thoughtfully and graciously with their peers, with the right motivation, surrounded by a supportive community, can change our world.

When we seek our purpose in life, we find that we aren't just being a good person. Bringing a deep level of rootedness and intent so that we make a difference in the lives of those around us will naturally cause us to **be a better kind of person**. It is a blessing to us, and a blessing because of us to others, to be conscience of now only what we do, but how we do it.

We began this service with a well-known melody that asks us to wake up from the slumber of our lives' mundane moments. We return to it now, to serve as an anthem for our desires and needs to seek more in life. It is a call for us to seek purpose in life, to intentionally listen to and care for others, and join with a community to have your voice heard.

It is my hope that Beth Israel is that place for you. A place where you can live, learn, and laugh. A place where you can be your best self, even if that means to fail forward. A place where you can gain and cultivate skills and values that push you further than you even imagined.

And on this Rosh Hashanah, I pray that Beth Israel is a place where you begin to realize that the person you are today is a stronger, more mature and confident person than you were last year.

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