***"Olam Hesed Yibaneh"* – "Build the World with Love" (Psalm 99:3)**
or
"I Have Fallen and I Can't Get Up: Can You Give Me a Hand"
2 Kislev 5769 / November 29, 2008
Rabbi Jay M. Stein

Last week we went to Washington for the day to see our son. It was my birthday and it seemed like a really good way to spend the day. Even though our eldest daughter couldn't make the trip because of another commitment, we decided to go any way. Missy drove down and I drove back. It was a wonderful day although, I'll be honest, for a guy who doesn't like to sit in one place all too long, it was a lot of driving. Thank God for the DVD player in the car. It has completely changed the way we travel. No more yelling, no more pushing, and no more arguing. Just peace and quiet for as long as the movie lasts. I imagine you already know where this is going. The trip was to last around two and half hours each way. The children selected one movie for the way down and one for the way back. The one on the way down lasted just over two hours, perfect. Missy got complete silence for her drive. Unfortunately, the movie they chose for the way back, during my driving time, was *James and the Giant Peach*. Parents beware, you should know this movie is only 90 minutes, barely enough time to get you to New Jersey if you're going north, or Delaware if you're going south. The perfect storm was brewing and I had no idea.

We left at 11:00 in the morning, arrived at American University at 1:30 in the afternoon, toured the campus showing our daughters our son's dorm room and some of his classrooms. We then went out for ice cream, picked up dinner for the ride home, took our son back to his dorm and left around 4:30 PM for the ride home. Just outside Baltimore, the speed limit changes from 65 miles an hour to 55 miles an hour. Just outside Baltimore the movie ended and just outside Baltimore, the kids got hungry for dinner. Just outside Baltimore I got pulled over. In the past when I have been pulled over, my heart starts to race. I immediately feel wronged, falsely charged with whatever they're about to say. No, I wasn't in the carpool lane with just one person in the car, I fully stopped at the stop sign, the light was yellow and I wasn't speeding. However, this time was different. First, I wasn't at all bothered to be pulled over, in fact, I wasn't even upset. Strangely enough, the bright lights and the fact that I had pulled the car over to side of the road, got our children to stop yelling.

Officer Beasely made his way over to the car. My wife, Missy, handed me the registration and the insurance cards. I rolled down the window and handed over my license, together with the other documents to this kind young man. Then he asked me what they must be trained to ask. "Do you know how fast you were going?" I'm not sure why they ask this. If I were to say the speed limit, that would not convince them, but it didn't matter. I had no idea what speed I was going. So that is what I said. "I am sorry but I have no idea what speed I was going. The kids were yelling, the movie had finished way to early and we still had a long way to go." Truthfully, I was a little down from leaving our son - so no, I had no idea how fast I was going. So he said, "You know the speed limit changes from 65 to 55 in Baltimore," to which I said, "I had no idea." I wanted to say, "Look what I'm dealing with, just put your head in and look, there is deli everywhere and the movie finished too early." To which he offered me a warning and sent me on my way, although I pleaded with him to take me down to the station for questioning and a good night's sleep, even if it was in a jail cell. You see the movie had ended way too early…and

I was tired. However, I did learn an important lesson – it is a lesson I share with you now. When our resources are stretched, our focus diminishes, when we are depleted, our response isn't always the best. In the case of driving, it can be dangerous, and when it comes to living in general, we are in jeopardy.

The officer kindly asked me, "Didn't you see the sign?" and of course I had not. I didn't notice that the speed limit had changed. I missed the sign. It is not that I had my eyes closed, but for all intense and purposes, they were closed. It was not that I had become blind, I just missed the sign.

That is exactly what I believe happened to Isaac in this morning's reading. He had lived a long difficult life. He had a strained relationship with his brother, a father who had tried to kill him and two kids that simply couldn't get along. Our Torah teaches, *"Va'tihiyena morat ruach l'yitzchak u'l'rivka.*" (26:35) "And they made life bitter for Isaac and for Rebekah." Jacob and Esau just made them miserable. As the Torah mentions, I remember childhood arguments and the repeated, "Please" by my parents, "Can't you just get along?" Like most other siblings, we often went at it. I also know it got to my parents, just as it gets to me. It wears you down. That is exactly what happened with Isaac.

"Vayehi ki zaken Yitzchak, v'tich-hena einav." (27:1) "And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old, his eyes were dim, so that he could not see." We know where the story is going. We know we are being set up for the main focus of this week's reading. It is the conflict between Jacob and Esau, it centers on a moment in Isaac's life when he is waning in strength and in sight. The entire conflicts seems to rest on Isaac, unable to see and unable to offer a second blessing, he is simply too tired. So, the Torah begs us to have a little *"rachmones"* – give Isaac a break. As parents, we don't understand the missteps. As parents, we don't recognize how powerfully our words are heard and the impact they have. We are furious at Isaac because he couldn't tell his children apart and he couldn't find another blessing for Esau, even if he had already given one to Jacob. So our tradition teaches that he was tired. He was worn out, he missed the signs. It happens to all of us.

When Sforno remarks, *"Lo karah zeh l'avraham v'yaakov,"* this never happened to Abraham or Jacob. At the end of his life, Jacob knew exactly who every one of his children were. Sforno seems to be asking, "Was this a life-long pattern? Was Isaac repeatedly negligent? Was Isaac absent and completely out of touch with his children? As the story unfolds, we become increasingly uneasy, hoping that every time we read the story, someone will have changed the ending.

31. "And he also had made savory food, and brought it to his father, and said to his father, 'Let my father arise, and eat of his son's venison, that your soul may bless me'."

32. "And Isaac, his father, said to him, 'Who are you?' And he said, 'I am your son, your firstborn, Esau'."

33. “And Isaac trembled very much, and said, ‘Who then is he who hunted venison, and brought it to me and I have eaten of all before you came, and have blessed him? Moreover, he shall be blessed’.”

34. “And when Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with a great and very bitter cry, and said to his father, ‘Bless me, me also, O my father’.”

35. “And he said, ‘Your brother came with cunning, and has taken away your blessing’.”

36. “And he said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob?’ for he has supplanted me these two times; he took away my birthright; and, behold; now he has taken away my blessing.” “And he said, ‘Have you not reserved a blessing for me’?”

37. “And Isaac answered and said to Esau, ‘Behold, I have made him your lord, and all his brothers have I given to him for servants; and with grain and wine have I sustained him; and what shall I do now to you, my son’?”

What? Couldn’t he have just made something up? You see, he couldn’t, he had nothing left in the tank. Which is what causes Rashi and Radak to come to his aid. When Radak explains, “*poel avar*,” and when Rashi recalls the story of the blinding of Isaac in this moment, we recognize they have a little more *rachmones*, a little more mercy than we. Both of these great commentaries gently guide us with the sad statement, “The ship has already sailed.” There really is nothing left for Esau.

The lesson is clear. The story was over when the text told us that Isaac’s eyes had grown dim. At this point, it is too late for either of the sons to get from their father that which they believe they needed. Unfortunately, and painfully so, Isaac was tired and he had nothing left. Sure Jacob could extract one more blessing, one more kind word, one more prayer – but that was it. Isaac’s life had come to an end. The sad, sad unfolding of his life, left him diminished – but at least no one could say he was saving himself. Which is what so many of do. We are saving ourselves for something, for someone instead of living in the here and now.

A friend told me of his Thanksgiving and it is a story that touched my soul. The images of the story left me warmed and inspired. Two days ago, we gathered around our thanksgiving tables with our extended family and friends in their seats. The laughter abounded, the stories of the past were recalled, and the loving glances across the table did not go unnoticed. Yet, I’m sure that for each of you, someone was missing. For my friend, it was his father. This year the trip was too much to make. This year, as his 86 years began to takes its toll, and his eyes grew dim, he couldn’t be with the family. Yet, the gathering was still to take place. You see, life goes on.

As so many have said to me after the passing of a loved one, “How does life just continue, doesn’t the world know about my loss, about the change in the metaphysics of the world because my dad, or my mom, or my life partner no longer walks this earth?” You see, life continues, and so did this past Thanksgiving. The difference for my friend was that, although his dad was still here, he just couldn’t be there. So, before the meal was served, he made his way to his dad’s side to sit with him, a proud man who still drives although maybe he shouldn’t. I imagined my friend

sitting by his side, holding his hand and talking about his life accomplishments. Maybe he shared with him a piece of Torah, something that would certainly bring a smile to both of them. Then he probably kissed him on the forehead and said, "I'll be back later." After the meal was enjoyed, my friend made up a small doggie bag and made his way back to his father's side. Now the light in the room had grown dim, but the stuffing was still warm. Maybe they spoke a little more, maybe they enjoyed a little turkey together. Maybe they just sat and held hands. Then I imagined he took his leave. My friend is a *tzadik*, a saint, because even though his father couldn't see, my friend certainly could.

Thanksgiving marks the beginning of Winter. This is a time when life will become more difficult for many within our community, a time when a slippery sidewalk will be posed incredible danger and getting to the supermarket might become overwhelming. So, if there is one thing I want you to remember from this sermon today it is this – see someone else. Reach out to someone who might need your help. When the temperatures go down and you turn up your thermostat, pick up the phone and call someone who might need your help. When you put on your coat and boots to go to the supermarket, stop by an older friend's home and ask if they might need something at the store. Tell them that you would be happy to bring them some milk or a loaf of bread. If you don't know of anyone who needs a call, just ask me, I have a list of 30 people right now who could use a little more contact.

Let me leave you with three words. Let me share with you the teaching of David HaMelech, just three words, *"Olam Hesed yibaneh."* (Psalms 99:3) "You must build this world with love." Together we can make this winter a little easier for those less fortunate. Just as my friend warmed my heart with his story, I share it with you in the hopes that you can make another's life a little warmer in the care you give.