

Chesed: Kindness
Installation “Response”
November 18, 2022

My friends... my heart is filled with love and light. Thank you for your trust, and for the great honor of calling me to serve this holy congregation.

I have so much to say... yet I had promised to be somewhat brief. As I recall a lesson from my colleague Rabbi Bob Alper, it does not bother him so much when he looks into a congregation and sees people [glancing at their watch] so much as it does when he looks out and sees this [tapping on watch to see if it still works.]

This night, I begin with my family. I am so grateful to my brother David, to my sister-in-law and brother-in-law Gina Novick and Shelly Kagan, to my children for joining us for this weekend. And I am blessed to be here with my best friend and occasional editor, the woman who sometimes saves you 5-10 minutes in the cuts she makes to my sermons, my wife and life-partner Julie Novick.

To colleagues and public servants who are here, to Councilmember Kaleem Shabazz and Reverend Paul Harte of Our Lady of Sorrows; to Rabbi Abby Michaleski of Vineland, President of the South Jersey Board of Rabbis and Cantors; to Roberta Clark of the Jewish Federation of Atlantic and Cape May Counties, I am grateful for your good wishes, and look forward to working

together for the good of our communities and our state. To my friend and colleague Rabbi Jack Kramer, who I have worked with in many different capacities, thank you for being here as well.

To Shelly Meyers and the Search Committee, who will join us later on the bimah, thank you for the trust you have placed in me.

To Linda Karp, the Beth Israel Board, the leadership and members of this congregation, may I serve you and lead you in ways which lift us all. And to my team at Beth Israel, Susan Sokalsky, Cookie Feldman and my bimah partner Cantor Larisa Averbakh, to Linda Cohen and Luke Barrett, may each of you find your own sense of fulfillment and kedusha, holiness, as we work on behalf of this synagogue, this congregation.

You will hear, tonight, a benediction from my friend and study partner, one time Director of Education of this congregation, Rabbi Amy Joy Small. You will also, I hope, hear her D'var Torah at services tomorrow morning, in which she shines a light on some extraordinary women in Jewish life - and shares the story of a special encounter she had while working here. I am delighted that you are here.

To Rabbi Jonathan Hecht, and his wife and our friend Gladys Rosenblum: it means so much to me that you are with us this weekend. Your *menschlikeit*, your friendship and support has been very important to me since the first moments of our time at Hartman. And the theme of my remarks, which I am almost ready to begin... is something I see reflected in you.

One other thought walks with me this weekend. It is the unfairness, the cruelty of COVID. Among myriad ways it upended our lives, the pandemic robbed those who reached milestones in their careers of the expected, the deserved, the proper culmination of their time of service. To my dear friend and colleague, to our Rabbi Emeritus David Weis and his wife Susan Weis, I know that there was a celebration of your role here – a role which continues in a new way. But perhaps that moment was not as it should have been, as it would have been but for the pandemic. May you find an abiding and deeply earned appreciation in this place, for what you have accomplished, what you have built, for the foundation you have put in place for the very future we look to now.

My friends, there are moments when I stand in this space, and I look around. I wonder, at times, about the windows behind me. One scene is from the Biblical Book of Ruth. And one word is closely associated with that book, and that story. It is the word *chesed*. And yes, I will translate the word. But not yet.

The other story strongly associated with the word *chesed* is in this week's portion. It is the oft-drawn scene of Rebecca at the well. Eliezer, Abraham's servant, sent off to find a mate for Isaac, thanks God for *chasdo*, God's *chesed* in leading him right to the right match.

I have a personal connection to this particular word. It may be the reason I am a rabbi. Before seminary, I was in graduate school in Biblical studies, at Brandeis. There, I wrote a paper about *chesed* in the Psalms. To do so, I read an obscure book written by a rabbi, archeologist and World War Two spy named Nelson Glueck, who was also the president of the institution now served by Rabbi Hecht.

At my interview for rabbinical school, there, on the admissions committee, was Dr. Glueck's widow. I later learned that she was deeply touched that I had read her husband's book! Sometimes I think that was the real reason I was admitted.

To translate an ancient language is not easy. It's not like we can call over a native speaker of Biblical Hebrew and say: "hey, what's this mean." What Glueck did was to explore the semantic field – by hand, before Google, before AI and computational linguistics, to list every appearance of the word *chesed* in the entire Bible... and try to tease out what it means.

His conclusion: *chesed* means “something really nice that someone does for you that you can sort of expect based on your relationship with them but you could not count on in a court of law.” He translated the word as “covenant-love.” The word we usually use is.... “kindness.”

Chesed. Kindness. That is the best we can do as a translation. And it is the best we can do, and what we are called to do, in our behavior, in our lives. In our congregation. And in our community. It is not that kindness is more important than the so-called content of a class, than the lesson plan. It is the content. It *is* the lesson.

I shared with you, in my first sermon here, that I hoped to find, and can help to shape, a community of **warmth, and depth, and breadth**. But if we do not begin with warmth, we never get to depth or breadth.

I don't always remember this. None of us does so, all the time. Any of us may miss the mark. But who we are, how we move forward, indeed, our very future depends on living this out. When we create a place where native and newcomer alike feel equally at home, where doors *feel* fully open even as security concerns mandate caution, when you are happy to see close friends but cliques and closed circles *never* block someone from stepping in, where we welcome each other and lift each other up, then, then, we can know we are doing our best... to ensure

the best future for this community. It should be a Bar Mitzvah, not a Bar, where everybody knows your name. And we're always glad you came.

A story, and a promise.

The Rabbi's Gift

Once upon a time there was a monastery. Once it was the center of a great order, but through the years its branch houses were lost. Now there were only five monks left in a single mother house.

In the woods surrounding the monastery there was a hut that a rabbi from a nearby town used for meditation. The abbot would sometimes visit, and the two of them would share hopes and dreams and fears alike. Improbably, perhaps, for that time and place, they became friends.

And so, as the abbot agonized over the state of his order, thinking there was nothing to lose, he asked the rabbi for advice. And the rabbi agreed... to visit the monastery.

The rabbi came, sat with the monks, watched them, observed them. Then he gathered them together. And this is what he said: "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is this. One of you" he said... "One of you is the Messiah."

The monks were in an uproar. What? What could this mean? What a waste of time! One of us is the Messiah? Come on!

But in the days and weeks and months that followed, the words just haunted them. The Messiah is one of us? What did he mean? Who did he mean? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. He couldn't have meant Brother Eldred! Eldred gets crotchety. But come to think of it, even though he's annoying, Eldred is virtually always right. Or maybe Brother Phillip? Phillip is so passive. He is just... there. But then, he has a gift for being there when you need him. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person.

The more they thought, the more time went on, the monks began to treat each other with an added measure of respect. After all, one of them might be the Messiah.

People did still come to visit the monastery, to picnic on its lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now surrounded the monks and seemed to radiate out from them. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come

back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order. And it was all because of the Rabbi's Gift, making the monks think, believe, act as if... one of them was the Messiah.

And the promise. I may not do this every time. I may not do this enough. But I will, in my work and the way I walk with you... I will reach out, to remember, and to remind each of you... how important, how special, how precious you are. And how we must treat each other this way, as often as we can.

Once again, truly, thank you all.

And Shabbat Shalom.