



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMINI ATZERET 5772 • 2011

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 20, 2011

Shemini Atzeret - *Yizkor*

One Small Act



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5772 Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

One of the important challenges facing us today as we celebrate Rarely are we blessed to see the long term impact of one small act by one small person. We live in the present, and our myopic vision can only see the here and now, not the big picture. As the 19th century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote: “We can only understand life backwards, but we must live it forwards.”

This is particularly true when we experience loss or tragedy. Can we, in that moment, see the beautiful fruit that will eventually grow out of the seeds of sorrow?

This sermon relates a powerfully moving story about a man who lost his young wife – about the way he grieved with dignity and joy, about the way this man honored his wife and inspired his five orphaned children, and about the far reaching impact of his actions 20 years later.

This is a story that teaches us how to honor the souls of our loved ones. It demonstrates to us the enduring power of *Yizkor*, when we immortalize those we love who have passed on, by celebrating their lives into perpetuity.

And how we must do this is to make every action count ... because you never know if you’ll get a chance to do it over. And on this score, we have some poignant advice from Steve Jobs who passed away two weeks ago.

One Small Act

ONE SMALL ACT THAT CHANGES THE WORLD

1. A Sad Story

In his later years, when the great 19th century sage known as the Chafetz Chaim was famous, Jews flocked to his home in Radin, Poland, from distant locations the world over. One day, the respected leader of a distant Jewish community in the Ukraine arrived, but instead of being welcomed by the Chafetz Chaim as everyone was, he was sent packing. Instead of embracing him, the great sage glared at him and exclaimed angrily, "I do not wish to see your face at all! Leave my house immediately!"

The visitor was shocked. He couldn't believe what was happening to him. He was being rudely banished by a man acclaimed as a Jewish saint and whose reputation of loving every Jew was legendary.

After a stunned silence, the visitor recovered sufficiently to ask, "My rabbi and teacher, what did I do? Why do you treat me this way? Why do you banish me your presence?"

Whereupon the Chafetz Chaim, still angry, replied: "*You* are responsible for millions of Jews who are being cut off from their Judaism by the Communists in Russia. You are to blame!"

The man sought to defend himself. "How can the great Rav accuse me of doing anything that caused this great tragedy! For not only did I not do anything at all, I did not even assist in the slightest way in such a terrible thing. Indeed, I mourn over this situation!"

"Oh yes, *now* you cry. But you forget what you once did! Refresh your memory. Many years ago, you were chairman of the Talmud Torah school in your village, and there was a young boy there, orphaned of his father, who lived on a nearby farm. The boy was mischievous and he tested the patience of the staff, and you had him expelled. Do you remember the name of that boy? It was Leibele. Leibele Davidovitch Bronshtein! And because you expelled that boy, his mother took him to another town and enrolled him in a non-Jewish school there. And he went on to become the leader of the Bolsheviks! Yes, Leib Bronshtein became Leon Trotsky! That boy was extraordinarily gifted. Had you not expelled him from the Talmud Torah, he could have become a great

rabbi, and he would have exerted a profound influence upon large numbers of Jews *for the good*. But because of your actions, it all turned out *for the bad*. He became our great enemy! So it is you who are guilty of all this horrendous suffering that Leon Trotsky has brought upon millions of Jews!"¹

2. One Small Act, Profound Impact

No act is insignificant. Just as one small gesture has the power to enliven worlds, a thoughtless one can destroy worlds.

But rarely are we blessed to see the long term impact of our actions. We live in the present, and our myopic vision can only see the here and now, not the big picture. [Certainly this man could not envision what one expedient move – expelling a troublesome child from school – could mean for the world.]

As the 19th century philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote: “We can only understand life backwards, but we must live it forwards.”

This is particularly true when we experience loss or tragedy. Can we, in that moment, see the beautiful blossom, tree or fruit that will eventually grow out of the seeds of sorrow?

And now I will tell you another story. This is a very powerful and moving story, but one with a life-changing ending, about a man who lost his young wife. It describes how he grieved with dignity, how he honored his wife and inspired his five orphaned children, and how his actions had a far-reaching impact 20 years later.

Above all, this story also teaches us how to honor the souls of our loved ones. It demonstrates to us the enduring power of *Yizkor*, when we immortalize the lives of our loved ones by celebrating their lives into perpetuity.

¹ Paraphrased from a story related by R. Sholom Schwadron, *Hagadas R. Sholom*, Jerusalem 1906, pp. 86-87.

3. A Dance Beyond Grief

It happened on Simchat Torah in 1969.²

It begins with the following scene:

A young 14-year-old boy is keenly watching a man dancing as if there are no worries in the world. His legs pump in a rhythm only his soul could produce. He looks like a flame, flickering on and on, reaching for a place beyond anything he has ever known.

“Wow,” the boy says to his father, “how could that man be so happy?”

“Which man?” the father wants to know.

“That man,” the young boy points to the whirling dancer. “He must be the happiest man on earth.”

As his father looks to where his son is pointing, he sees the black-bearded chassid with five children in tow. The father’s eyes fill with tears and he sighs: “That man is Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Gansbourg and he lost his young wife to leukemia just six days ago.”

“But then how can he be so happy?” The boy wants to know. “How can he possibly dance like that?”

“Because today is Simchat Torah and it is a mitzvah to dance and to be happy. This is what a Jew does; this is what a real chassid does.”

4. A Dance and a Song

Despite his loss, Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Gansbourg had decided to follow that year, as every year, the custom instituted by the Lubavitcher Rebbe to walk to a synagogue other than his own and celebrate with other Jews. Hundreds of Chabad chassidim did likewise. And, each year on Simchat Torah, Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Gansbourg would take his young children to a small *shul* in East Flatbush where they would dance with the Torah and rejoice with that community. And it was there, in that little *shul*, that the dialogue I just related between father and son took place.

² As told by Mendel Jacobson, Rabbi Gansbourg’s grandson. See: [http://meaningful-life.com/oped/2010/9.28.10\\$Simchat_TorahCOLON_Through_Water_and_Fire.php](http://meaningful-life.com/oped/2010/9.28.10$Simchat_TorahCOLON_Through_Water_and_Fire.php)

fter the dancing was over in East Flatbush, Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Gansbourg and his five little children walked back to Crown Heights. He dropped them off with their grandmother and hurried to 770 where the Lubavitcher Rebbe was in midst of a joyous *farbrengen*. Every year on Simchat Torah, the Rebbe would speak at length, his inspirational talks punctuated by singing, and it had always been the task of Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Gansbourg to begin the *niggunim*.

The *shul* at 770 Eastern Parkway was packed from floor to ceiling; people were clinging to bleachers and rafters. As the Rebbe finished one segment of his talk, the crowd looked to the new widower to begin a song.

What happened next was one of the most dramatic experiences in the lives of those who attended that gathering. A rare moment of truth...

Through the hush of thousands of people, his gentle but defiant voice began to sing a vibrant Chassidic melody, "We in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn." (*Mi vadiom nye patonyem, ee v'agniom nye s'gorim*). The Rebbe looked up and stared at the man – with a piercing, knowing gaze that is impossible to describe. Suddenly the Rebbe sprang up from his chair and began dancing in place, swaying back and forth, with incredible intensity and passion. Witnesses say that in all the years the Rebbe never danced – never before and never after – quite like that.

As the Rebbe swung his arms, leading the singing, the crowd became more and more energized, chanting in unison, "We in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn; we in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn." Faster and faster they chanted, as if in a trance.

People present later described the unbelievable sight of this fragile man, Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Gansbourg, who had just experienced utter devastation – surrounded by waves of people, being led by the Rebbe himself – singing: "We in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn." As if to say, nothing – not even death – can vanquish our spirit.

Everyone melted into the song. The joy and the tears all dissolved into one transcendent dance; a dance that captured the essence of joy and pain, ecstasy and agony – the indestructible core of life itself. At that moment everything made sense. "We in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn."

Moments like that become frozen in time.

5. Twenty Years Later

Fast-forward 20 years:

A phone call comes in to a major Jewish children's organization in Crown Heights, *Tzivos Hashem*.

"Hello," the voice on the other end of the line says. "I would like to sponsor children's programs for Simchat Torah."

"That's great," the secretary happily replies. "But, if I may ask, why do you have this particular interest in children's programs for Simchat Torah?"

"Well, you see, when I was a boy, every Simchat Torah my father and I would go to a small *shul* in East Flatbush to celebrate. One year, when I was 14, as I was watching the few people dancing in a circle, I noticed one man who looked so happy, as if everything in the world was perfect. I stood there transfixed, wondering how this man could exude so much joy. I asked my father this question, and my father told me that I should know this man just lost his wife but, because he is a real chassid and the Torah says to be happy on Simchat Torah, he is happy. This made a very big impression on my 14-year-old mind – that a Jew could put aside all his pain and suffering and be happy just because it's a mitzvah to be happy. So I decided I would like to help other children celebrate the happiness and joy of Simchat Torah."

6. The Legacy

Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Gansbourg has since passed from this world. He saw his five children grow up, he saw his grandchildren be born and now his grandchildren are raising his great-grandchildren. Each child is a perpetual flower that has blossomed out of a seemingly small event in 1969, due the choice of one man in a small corner of the globe. The power of the resolve of that one man to now allow his tragedy and loss to control his destiny has now affected generations!

We have that same power today as we celebrate Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah, and as we say *Yizkor*.

All you have to do is remember that your small gesture, your little dance, your rousing song ... moves worlds.

So never underestimate what you can accomplish with your one small act. You never know who is watching. You never know what impact your behavior has. A child may be watching and your one act can forever motivate that child, or forever change that child's life.

We always have the ability to plant seeds. Seeds that will grow into beautiful flowers or mighty trees.

So make every action count ... because you never know if you'll get a chance to do it over. And on this score, we have some poignant advice from Steve Jobs who passed away recently.

7. Advice from Steve Jobs

Some six years before his untimely death, Steve Jobs gave a commencement address at Stanford University and he urged the graduates to "live each day as if it is your last, because one of these days, you'll most certainly be right." He went on:

[When I first heard that advice at age 17,] it made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself, "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" And whenever the answer has been "no" for too many days in a row, I knew I need to change something. Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important thing I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life, because almost everything - all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.

Mr. Jobs then revealed that one year earlier he had been diagnosed with an incurable pancreas cancer of a type that brings about death in a matter of months. He lived with that diagnosis for a day before a biopsy proved that the original diagnosis had been wrong. He did have pancreas cancer but the type he had was treatable. In fact, he did live for another seven years after that diagnosis. But that experience changed for him an intellectual truth to an actual one. As he told the Stanford U graduates:

This was the closest I've been to facing death, and ... having lived through it, I can now say this to you with a bit more certainty ...

No one wants to die, even people who want to go to Heaven don't want to die to get there, and yet, death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It's life's change agent; it clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now, the new is you. But someday, not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it's quite true. Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma, which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice, heart and intuition [which] somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.

Think about that when you dance today/tonight. Think about that when you remember your father or mother. Think about that when you commit to perpetuating their legacy and life. Think about that when you lean down and lift your child on your arms or shoulders. For today/tonight you hold life in the palm of your hand. Amen.