

Help Was Right Underneath My Nose

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Once upon a time, in the Louisiana bayou, a rather young hermit named Shlomo lived in a dilapidated cabin. One humid afternoon, he was watching his television, as he often did, when the weather forecast announced that a hurricane was coming; it was going to be a bad one.

Shlomo thought to himself: “I am a faithful man; I pray every day. God will see me through this crisis.”

The storm came and the waters began to rise. Someone floated by Shlomo’s house in a canoe. “Come with me; I’ll take you to dry land.”

“God will see me through.”

A few hours later, the water was so high that Shlomo had no choice but to stand on the roof of his little cabin. A National Guard helicopter started to hover right over him; they lowered a ladder, and through a megaphone, Shlomo heard, “Climb up the ladder! We’ll take you to safety!”

“God will see me through. I’ll be fine.”

Shlomo, of course, was not fine.

Upon his arrival in Heaven, God greeted Shlomo: “Welcome to heaven, Shlomo!”

“No offense, God, but why am I here? I am a faithful man who prays; I thought you would see me through any crisis. So why should I die in a hurricane?”

God looked at Shlomo, rather stoically, and said, “Shlomo: I sent you a weather forecast, a mensch in a canoe, and a National Guard helicopter. What more did you want?”

So what happened? Simply put, Shlomo did not recognize the help that was right in front of his face.

I’m so grateful for this anecdote. Especially when I’m visiting someone in the hospital. Because when someone is in the hospital, they need many kinds of help. Maybe not from a mensch in a canoe. But still, help they need. Often, even when the help is already there, people don’t realize the help they need is right in front of their faces.

Help is always going to be there. God promises this to us in Psalm 121:

שִׁיר לַמַּעֲלוֹת אֲשָׁא עֵינַי אֶל־הַהָרִים מֵאֵן יָבֹא עֲזָרִי:

“A song for ascents: I turn my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come?”

Fortunately, the psalm answers its own question:

עֲזָרִי מֵעַם יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

“My help comes from Adonai, maker of heaven and earth.”

Still, it’s scary to need help. I think most of us can recognize that. But the scarier concern is this: will we recognize that help when it appears?

Help comes from God but we don’t always recognize it as such. We might not recognize the holiness in a weather forecast, the sacred nature of a canoe, nor the divine gift that is a soldier from the National Guard.

Sometimes help is right there and, like Shlomo, we simply do not recognize the help that is being offered.

For me, and I think for many of us, often beyond asking for help, recognizing help can be incredibly hard. But it’s wonderful when we realize that it is. And especially now, on Rosh HaShanah, when we’re thinking about ways we’ve missed the mark in 5784, and contemplating how we can do better in 5785, let’s take a moment to think about what we can do to recognize the help which is right under our noses.

One of the reasons this is difficult is because so many of us are often reluctant to ask, or look, for help. But help is something that God is always ready to provide us.

We merely need to look to Avraham Avinu to find a beautiful story of asking for, and recognizing, this profound gift of help.

Abraham, in his old age, and therefore unable to complete a critical task, sends his servant, Elazar, to find a wife for Isaac. Elazar knows he will need God’s help, and Abraham promises he shall have it. After all, how else is he going to know who the right bride might be?

Elazar asks God for help to discern who should be Isaac’s bride.

God leads him to Rivka. She appears, rises to the occasion, and returns to Mamre with the servant, where Isaac and, presumably Abraham as well, are deeply grateful to Elazar for bringing this amazing woman to them. I see Elazar as a hero of this story because he recognizes the help God is sending him.

That's the trick. Understanding that while help comes from God, when it does, it will be through another person. The challenge is that help might not be obvious, even when it's right in front of our noses.

The great twentieth-century sage John Lennon wrote the famous words "I need somebody. Help!"

In an interview, Lennon revealed that the lyrics to "Help!" were deeply personal. He opened up and revealed a personal side of himself, his response to his incredible rise to fame. In 1980, Lennon spoke with Playboy Magazine, which I only read for the articles, saying "I was fat and I was depressed and I was crying out for 'Help!'"

Lennon must not have had an Elazar. But he did have a helicopter, and whatever his version of the National Guard might have been. It was right under his nose, but he did not understand.

And we all know what got Lennon through his crisis: he got by with a little help from his friends.

Too often, we do not recognize the help that's right in front of our faces. We need a little help getting it pointed out to us.

For those who want to provide help, sometimes they need to look beyond, well, the shadow of their own nose, to know what to offer.

I expect that most of us in this room have been in a situation where someone asked, "How can I help?" And yes, we have probably all done this ourselves once or twice. I know I have.

"How can I help," though, is not a great question, because envisioning the kind of help we might need can be an insurmountable task.

I had a pretty major - and quite successful - surgery in 2017. A few days before, my father asked "how can I help? What can I do?"

I had never had a serious operation before; I had no idea how to answer his question. I could not even envision what the "right help" would be. I don't think I would have recognized it at the time, even if it suddenly appeared in my lap.

While I was recuperating in the hospital, my friend Randi texted me. She didn't ask *how* she could help me, or even what kind of help I needed. Instead, she asked if she could bring a few mutual friends to watch a livestream of Kabbalat Shabbat services. I immediately knew the answer to her question; it was a resounding yes.

That Friday night proved to be one of the most memorable Kabbalat Shabbat experiences of my life. Randi brought grape juice, and little electric candles, and challah. As the melodies of service floated through the air, a woman knocked from the hospital hallway.

“Are you having Shabbat?” she asked.

“We are!”

“May my husband and I join you?”

And just like that, we went from five to seven.

I’ll never forget that evening. And the critical component, both wise and holy, was that people knew the right kinds of help to offer in that moment.

If Randi had said, “What can I do?” I would have had no idea how to answer her. But she, brilliantly, understood the right way to be of assistance. I lifted my eyes from the 8th floor of The Mount Sinai Hospital and saw that help come, not only from Randi, but also from God.

She also made sure I recognized the help for what it was. I didn’t have to ask for anything, nor did I have to do any work in order to recognize the help she was offering. That was the true blessing.

I’d like to close with one more story, a delightful tale by Rev Nachman of Breslov. It’s a fable about a king and queen whose beloved son one day declares himself to be a chicken. The young noble strips off all his clothes and sits underneath the table, pecking at seeds and scraps. Instead of speaking, he just clucks. His parents are at a loss; they have no idea what they—or anyone—could possibly do for their son. So they send out a royal decree offering a reward to the first person who can fix the young prince.

Soothsayers, wizards, potion-makers, all kinds, show up at the palace doors to try. None have any success. One day, a rabbi is passing by the palace, and he is called in; is there any way this wise man could help the prince?

The rabbi walks into the dining room; the prince is sitting under the table, nude, clucking and pecking at his seeds and scraps.

After a moment, the rabbi strips off his clothing and sits under the table with the young gentleman and starts pecking at the seeds. After some time, the scholar says, “You know, we can still be chickens but eat better food than seeds and scraps under the table.” So they get up, and a feast is brought to them.

“You know, we can still be chickens, but also wear clothes, too.” And the prince is promptly dressed in his finest garb; the rabbi dons his clothing as well.

“You know, we can still be chickens but go about the world having our regular lives.”

And so it was.

The prince didn't know he needed help, his parents had no idea what could be done for their son, but the rabbi recognized exactly what help was needed.

This year, when we find ourselves in need of assistance in any form, a boost, true help, may we be granted the gift of recognizing what appears before us.

אֲשָׂא עֵינַי אֶל הַהָרִים, when we lift our eyes to the hills, may God always provide us with the help we need, whether it's a storm forecast, a canoe, a helicopter, or a friend when we're in need, may the sacredness of that help always be on our minds.

Shana Tovah; may we all be blessed with a sweet new year filled with help, health, and happiness.