

On this final night of the Ten Days of Repentance, we are left with one more base to run at the bottom of the tenth inning. It is a tied game that will determine whom we shall become in the New Year.

Tonight as we look eagerly at home plate, with success or failure on the line, we are still in the Golah – our self-banishment from the Promised Land of who we might yet become tomorrow.

We are yet to take that one step to lift us from Golah (exile) to Geula, our return home to redemption and wholeness. The difference between these two Hebrew words is minimal; a mere one letter, an alef, determines whether we would continue to spiral out of control in the orbit of today or soar to new heights by attaining our true self and destiny.

And that brings me to the spectacular new altitude that America's true hero, astronaut Neal Armstrong who died in the final weeks of the old year had reached when he became the first human to ever walk on the moon.

Armstrong's first utterance after taking the first step on the moon: "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind" was a ten-word sentence that makes no sense at all.

For Armstrong actually meant to utter 11 words: "1 small step for *a* man, one giant leap for mankind." Indeed, without the "a", Armstrong message was oxymoronic: How could his walking on the moon be concurrently a small step *and* a giant leap for humankind? Why, it was either small or giant! It is clear to see how a mere one letter, the tiniest of all words in the dictionary, can make such a huge difference.

In the same light, perhaps, the most powerful force on earth -- the splitting of the smallest thing, the atom -- can be set off to cause the biggest explosion on earth. This is another example that teaches us that the power is not in big things but in little ones.

Come to think of it, the ostensibly grandest event of the Torah – the very creation of the cosmos including the creation of humanity -- was not that important after all to judge by the short shrift it receives in the Torah – mere 31 verses top -- while the mundane, if not arcane, narrative of the mobile sanctuary for the service of God – the humble goatskin tent of meeting at the Sinai desert – is *ten-fold longer*, suggesting that our daily and dull service to God -- in that small tent or outside it -- was the real important thing, while the incomprehensibly vast universe was so much less important.

Indeed, this universe, Jewish folklore tells us, would cease to exist unless it was sustained in every generation thanks solely to the small yet saintly deeds of 36 anonymous individuals known to us simply as the Lamed Vav (Hebrew for 36). No, it is not the deeds of great and scholarly celebrities that enable God to keep the world afloat but rather the small and humble deeds of these 36 unknown and uncelebrated people. So unheralded are these saintly folks, they themselves do not know they are Lamed-Vovnic.

The ancient Rabbis teach us that God does not enable any person to become great before that person is tested in small things. A person like Moses as a desert shepherd showing compassion to an exhausted tiny lamb by carrying it on his shoulders from a far off waterhole back to the flock, was,

therefore, deemed as great by God, thus befitting Moses to be IL's emancipator from Egyptian slavery.

Two millennia ago the great sage Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, the founder of Rabbinical Judaism, reminded us the same when instructing all those engaged in the small and mundane act of tree planting not to interrupt their humble, however sacred, work *even if* the Messiah were to appear in the land of IL out of the blue. *First finish the planting* and *only then* go greet the redeemer of IL he taught; the small act of planting being deemed grander than welcoming the fantastic event of the Messiah's long-awaited arrival. It is such seemingly small things – but, oh so great in God's eyes -- that sustain us as Jews and perhaps even sustain the world.

I recently learned of the incredible magnitude of the *small act* or *humble word* upon reading how the life of a Jewish chemist was saved due to *small and simple words* of *greeting* after he accidentally locked himself in the freezer of his plant's laboratory -- the safety handle inside the freezer failed to open -- at the very hour when all of his colleagues were clocking out. With no way to communicate with the outside – his cell phone left on his desk and his frightful shouts and forceful pounding on the door heard by none -- he prepared to meet his death by confessing his sins and saying the sh'ma. Though still pounding on the door of the freezer the cold temperature was beginning to numb him. And then someone totally unexpectedly heard him and opened the door. It was the custodian. It was really a miracle that he chanced by because he never came at such an hour to the chemist's lab, but on that evening he was looking eagerly for the chemist. "You are the only one of the 90 employees of this plant who greets me every morning with a "good morning", like you did today, and the only one who says 'good night' to me in the evening when you go home" the custodian explained to the chemist why he was looking for him. "So, here I am about to go home myself seeing that everyone has gone home, all but you. Yet, you always wish me a 'good night', but I did not see you leave through the exit door to the parking lot. So, I thought that maybe I missed you or you did not have time to stop by me, though it had never happened before. I was going to let it go by, but then I thought that maybe you had to stay late for some reason in your laboratory. So I decided to go look for you so you could still wish me "good night" like you always do; it means the world to me. So I went up to your lab, and then I heard your poundings from inside the refrigerator..."

Friends, There is nothing small about such "small talk" that led the custodian to go look for a man who treated him *daily like he was somebody*, a fellowman endowed with the same divine image as himself.

Consider, also, the old story of two women friends who agreed that she who was the first to depart this earth would reveal herself to the other in a dream to tell her about her new heavenly abode. And so it was that after one of the friends departed the world she appeared in her friend's dream – as agreed upon – yet because of Heaven's code of conduct she was not at liberty to tell her living friend about her new life other than reveal to her one thing: "Do you remember" she asked when one day

we went together to collect Tzedakah money for the needy? Do you remember the elderly lady standing alone by her house whom we both waved warmly our hand to? And do you remember the child who pointed us to the street we could not find and to whom we said a meaningful “thank you”? Well, this friendly waving of the hand and that appreciative “thank you” were also considered in my final heavenly judgment.”

Friends, such small gestures of *Mentchlichkeit* (or *Derekh Eretz*) could affect life on earth too – not only in Heaven – as we have already seen. Tongue in cheek, someone has said, "Be kind to the girl who picks up her basketball from your driveway each time it rolls there from the street. You may be on trial in her court some day."

You know, when Moses dies, the Torah notes very simply that he was a true “servant of God.” That’s it. That’s the whole eulogy.

How would or could we become true servants of God as we all aspire to become especially tonight? After all whether by intent or by autopilot we already practice, “more or less”, most of the 10 Commandments.

Yet, the Rabbis teach us that serving God honestly can only happen if we perform the small and lighter mitzvot of *Derekh Eretz* (*mentchlichkeit*) that many tread on with their shoes thinking that they are so minor in the scheme of things when compared with heavy weights such as this day’s fast.

But a small talk, where without quite saying so, or even by mere silence or facial expression we only imply another person’s demerits, thus stirring up the dust of *Lashon Ha-Ra* (badmouthing), or stealing away from a parking lot after scratching someone else’s car without leaving our contact information on the dashboard of the affected car, or doing our normative work half-heartedly, should not be dismissed as negligible fluff. Nor is yelling at an employee who erred or was remiss, rather than taking the matter with him privately after first calming down. Or calculated flattery offered as a kind of bribery, or retracting a promise we once made lest fulfilling it might now bring us some disadvantage, or the automatic throwing out of every charity appeal that comes in the mail. All such little actions constitute examples for behaviors that seem too small to take note of. Yet they resemble a tiny spark that could soon flare up into a mighty flame, or a tiny hole in the bottom of a boat that could sink it before long.

And by contrast, what could be our small tasks today in our Jewish living that would be considered meritorious in the court on high, whose authority we have just sought right before K”N to permit us to pray with transgressors such as ourselves?

Helping someone find a job? Befriending a new member of our congregation? Alleviating from the disgrace of being overlooked and the pain of loneliness someone whom we do not even notice from a distance of one yard? Offering a fellow in distress kindness – yes, even if it is “non-deserving”, as a better alternative to callousness or indifference? Coming to the synagogue once in a while -- even when we don’t feel like it -- if only to complete a minyan and enable thereby others to hear the Torah or say Kaddish, both of which requiring a quorum of 10 fellow Jews? And what about allowing

one day a week to pass without eating meat, eggs or dairy in empathy if not for our own health then to the health of industrial farm animals, whose daily suffering we conveniently ignore for the sake of satiating our demanding taste buds? Putting small change in a tzedaka box by the cashier rather than pocketing it, or calling back the person we assured: "I'll call you back" when interrupting his call to take a more urgent one, or letting in a car inching in from a side street, or picking up a piece of litter in the public domain that you didn't drop in order to dispose of it properly, or lend \$500 to an out-of-work friend who must pay his rent or mortgage despite the specters that he won't be able to pay back any time soon?

In our world of big things, little may not weigh much though it would be salubrious to assume that God – or at least our conscience that hasn't yet quite given up on us -- notices our small choices.

Such acts could have untold positive impact and friendly consequences on others *just like most medicine* whose healing ingredients are *minimal in volume*, perhaps one tiny milligram, but do make a big impact on our body or mind.

IL the leading start up nation of the world has been known for many years for its innovative dripping irrigation system whose secret is that trees develop best with a minimal however steady source of irrigation, drop by drop mixed with some nourishment; these drops penetrate straight to the roots of the tree and provide maximal defense against illnesses caused by wet leaves. Yes, small and constant watering yield more and better quality produce.

So what does this dripping system have to do with our reluctance to keep reminding our children, indeed even ourselves, who we are and what our values are? Why, it is similarly through light, yet constant dripping of words and small deeds that we continue and grow as Jews. With such drop-by-drop watering it is quite likely that one day our children will grow up in the direction we train them now. As long as you keep your words dripping and coming at them they are bound to penetrate to the roots; may be not now – may be they do not listen to you presently when you talk to them of values and of the Jewish way, but at some point the dripping results of your words and deeds will bear fruit.

And so it is with the very three Hebrew words with which our Yom Kippurim will come to an end tomorrow night -- Next Year in Jerusalem. Three Hebrew words we regard as small even as we recite them by rote, words that we hardly take seriously even when we visit cities like Paris, Rome or London that we might find to be far grander and more intellectually engaging in comparison to Jerusalem, only several jet hours away.

But what if we could visit one day either the majestic moon or Jerusalem D.C.? No brainer you might say. A visit to the moon would be huge, while a visit to Jerusalem – despite our lip service to this effect twice a year, for we say these three words also at the conclusion of the Seder night on Pesah – would be small, at least in comparison.

But in truth which visit is superior to the other could only be answered by one who has been to both, to the moon and to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is Israel's foremost symbol of service to God; the Kotel represents what was left of the Temple where that service was maximal. The moon, by contrast, represents the universe, and we already have noted how Torah compares them both.

Reflecting this view was astronaut Neal Armstrong who visited IL after his trip to the moon. In the course of his tour of the Old City of Jerusalem and accompanied by Israeli archeologist Meir ben Dov the profoundly moved Armstrong told ben Dov as they approached the Temple Mount: "I have to tell you: I am more excited stepping on these stones than I was stepping on the moon." It is this small visit that proved for Armstrong to be the foremost giant step he had ever taken. You see, a small person appreciates big things. A great person values immensely the small things in life.

And so it is for us as we try and chart out the course of our life in the New Year.

Our T'shuvah cannot be successful if it feels like a KO in the first minute of the fight; it cannot be a sweeping total revamp of all that is broken in our kingdom that was marked up on our life's negative graph and is switched overnight to our positive graph. For an effective T'shuvah we need to move gently in small paces and only lightly shift our posture. Though it might be difficult to notice such small changes, making them requires much integrity and trial; it is in the small T'shuvah that a real change is underway.

"I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble", said the legendary Helen Keller. Or in the timeless old words of Lao-Tzu: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a [small] single step."

Let us begin our journey too.