

Rabbi Rick Kellner  
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### Temple Isaiah's Big Tzedakah Pursuit

Let's play a game. I am going to describe a popular game and you tell me what it is. Let's start off with an easy one, accumulate the most money and the most properties. (Monopoly). Create words from tile letters and accumulate the most points. (Scrabble) Answer trivia questions to get the most pie pieces. (Trivial Pursuit) Follow a colored path to get to the finish line, pass places such as Gum Drop Mountain and Candy Cane Forest. (Candyland). Ok let's get a little harder. Complete a series of survival skills. (Survivor) Be the best business person and win an important title and job opportunity (The Apprentice).

In the last seven years reality TV games have swept across the world as popular ways of entertainment. The thrills of American Idol, the bachelor, Survivor, The Apprentice along with tons of others are viewed on American televisions each night. The object of each one is to be the best. This week a new reality TV show entered our living rooms. "Oprah's Big Give" brought this new concept together where the object is to be the biggest giver. Who can work to raise the most money, or make the biggest impact on a person who needs it most. Every person on this show wants to make a difference in the world.

We Isaians don't need a TV show to understand the importance of giving and working to change the lives of others. Every time we walk into this sanctuary, we see the words *tzedek tzedek tirdof* above our ark doors. Justice, Justice shall you pursue. These words from Temple Isaiah are visible in our Temple logo and are arguably the core message of the Jewish tradition. What

should we do in our lives? Work to pursue that justice and righteousness are manifest throughout the world. But the rest of the world doesn't see this message every day. The world gets caught up in earning the most money and buying the best material objects. Sure, we all want the best for ourselves but even the wealthiest give places that are in need.

Changing lives and the world is difficult work. It is a kind of work that does not ever seem to go unfinished. If we help to feed a hungry family, we know that there are hundreds of others around our city who go hungry each night. We may finish one aspect of the work but leave a piece of it undone because we just can't do it. This week we read the final portion of the book of Exodus. Our Torah tells us, "Just as Adonai had commanded Moses, so the Israelites had done all the work. And when Moses saw that they had performed all the tasks – as Adonai had commanded, so they had done – and Moses blessed them." Hasidic commentator Menorat Zahav writes that this work was utterly perfect and without a single flaw. Aspiring to create this perfection in our efforts to perform social justice is exactly the kind of work we should be doing. When we make a personal connection with someone in need, their world becomes perfect.

Sadly, this type of work can be so difficult to engage in on a daily basis. When we make a difference in someone's life we are fulfilled, but at the same time we know that there are so many more worlds out there that need to be changed. Individuals and families who face homelessness are out there even if we find one family a home. The worlds we have to save are endless. For some, this thought is discouraging. We can be turned off from the kind of work that we

were put here to do. The Pirke Avot, a text devoted to ethics responds to this notion by saying, “You are not obligated to complete the work, but you are not free to avoid it either.” Our sages are trying to teach us a very important lesson. We must know that there is work out there to be done. We do not have to solve the world’s problems, but we cannot avoid the work that we have to do.

There are myriad ways in which we can give to the world. Former President Clinton has devoted an entire book to the idea of Giving because he sees the importance in the way people can change the world. Clinton writes, “As we look to the future, many of our greatest challenges, can be overcome through the act of giving. He further writes, that the true book of giving is being written by people like us every day. Every one of us has the power to change the world.” Clinton also explains that with the power of the internet we have the ability to do some amazing things affect lives all around the globe. If you visit [giving.clintonfoundation.org](http://giving.clintonfoundation.org) you can find stories of people who have given back to the world in amazing ways. I read one story about a woman from Nashville who is a baker in the local grocery store. While watching the news one day, she discovered that there are 8 billion unused gift cards around the world. She started a project called the “Re-gift a life project.” Where she put boxes on store counters to help collect gift cards with a few dollars left on them, ones that otherwise might go unused. She collected all of these cards and gave them to shelters so that they could buy clothes, and food and help re-establish families that are in need. What an amazing idea. Tress Chapin heard a story on the news and has made a huge difference. Mary Beth Waters from Amarillo Texas,

started creating Love packets for kids who are in stressful situations through no fault of their own. These packets include a stuffed animal, a juice drink, cookies, a coloring book and a pack of crayons. These packets are taken to the sheriffs office or the hospital ER, the Ronald McDonald house or any place they think of where someone could make a difference.

These are simple projects that are sparked from one person. We don't have to look very far to see similar projects taking place. They happen right here inside the walls of this Temple. On any given day we can find a request for a b'nai mitzvah student's mitzvah project. Or we can find a group of people going to pack boxes for One Voice. We make move-in baskets for Beyond Shelter families and we even send a group of teenagers to Beyond Shelter to read to the children there.

We are doing great work, but there is always more that can be done. Let's say we are going to play a big game for the next few months. Let's call it Temple Isaiah's Big Tzedakah Pursuit. Each of you who are here tonight is going to leave with a business card. This is an unusual business card as the standards go. On one side of the business card is the logo of an organization with which Temple Isaiah does ongoing work. On the other is a list of three ways that you can help these organizations. Our challenge tonight is to join together as a community and pick one way, two ways, as many ways as you can pursue justice. Once you've completed a project trade cards with someone else and start all over again. The winners of Temple Isaiah's Big Tzedakah Pursuit will be the people we help and the lives we change.

As Moses blessed the people upon finishing the Tabernacle, may we be able to bless each other when we complete an act of justice. The Torah does not tell us the words Moses used to bless the people, but the Rabbis wrote that Moses blessed the people by saying, "May it be God's will that God's presence dwells on the work of all your hands. Today this work is the sanctuary we create when we pursue justice. So as we join together in doing the work of pursuing justice, let God's presence dwell on the justice work that our hands will produce. Let's say amen.