

## FOCUS: On Hardship & Hope

# A Small Act of Kindness

## A Conversation with Rabbi Edythe Mencher

*In times of trouble, a smile, a good word, or a simple act of kindness can restore hope in a friend or stranger—in ways we may never know.*

*Rabbi Edythe Held Mencher, a licensed clinical social worker, was interviewed by the RJ editors.*

### **What is most important to cultivate in times of adversity?**

In order to overcome or even to simply withstand adversity, we need, most of all, to feel hope and to believe that we matter: that we are here for a reason—the world deeply needs *us*—and our efforts make a difference to us and to others. We need to tap into past memories or have new experiences that cause us to feel worthy, wanted, unique, and precious.

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl learned from his own experience that the capacity to spiritually survive the worst adversity—the degradation and suffering of incarceration in a concentration camp—was dependent upon the ability to conjure up the image of a single person, near or far, alive or even deceased, who would care deeply about that person's survival. Frankl also observed that engaging in even small acts of morality, generosity, and courage allowed individuals to maintain a sense of spiritual freedom. The hungry person who shared a morsel of bread might have felt greater gnawing in his gut—but also some diminishment of the searing pain within his heart that could make more difference to survival than food.

Our Jewish tradition teaches that each of us is here to bring light and repair to a broken world. We need to tap into the understanding that no one else can fulfill the roles and destiny belonging to us. Even if we perceive ourselves as too old, too impoverished, too depressed,



too constrained by circumstance to contribute much, we can never know how our smile, our words of encouragement, even our own courage and persistence in the face of difficulty may inspire another person who is at his/her own crossroads. A single act of kindness can reverberate through time. In this way we can begin to fathom ourselves as part of a chain of events that can move the world.

### **Can you give an example?**

A middle-aged woman recently shared with me an incident that happened thirty years ago: “Pregnant and unmarried, I was staying with a friend’s parents awaiting the birth of a child I would soon give up for adoption. Thinking I was asleep, my friend’s mother straightened my blankets and kissed me softly on the forehead. This kiss came at a time when I felt utterly alone and a disappointment to my own parents. My faith and hope through many difficult times in my life

have been sustained through the memory of that kiss.”

A thirty-something man told me this story: “Ten years ago I was teaching poetry to the chronically mentally ill in the lobby of a single-room-occupancy hotel in Manhattan and feeling depressed about the low pay and the low status associated with the job. One evening when my class concluded, it was storming outside. A student, a rather forbidding-looking older woman who had never spoken, asked me to wait for her. When she returned, she handed me an umbrella. Thanking me for the class, she said, ‘I noticed you did not have an umbrella and was concerned that you would get soaked.’

Seeing how a woman for whom life had afforded little protection was so concerned about my well-being made me realize that our poetry lessons were as much about human relationships as about study. Ten years have passed and I still have that umbrella as a reminder. My faith—in myself, my work, and even the world—is sustained by my memory of that encounter.”

As Rabbi Larry Kushner points out, in Hebrew the word for angel, *malach*, also means messenger. When our actions bring reminders of the light and goodness in the world, then we are messengers and angels all at once.

### **How does hope help us?**

Hope allows us to construct dreams for a better future—it lets us visualize a time when we will view our situation differently than we do today. Both hope and faith open us to think of suffering

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