

How To Prepare Yourself to Be A Mitzvah Hero **Danny Siegel**

Heroes and Chevra

There are many kinds of heroes.

They are everywhere.

They are in books like the Chumash, like Abraham and Sarah and Moses and his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam, and even Pharaoh's daughter, because she saved Moses's life when he was a baby. They are in other books, like ones about Israel that tell the story of Theodore Herzl who thought it would be important to have a home for the Jewish people after many years without one, or Chaim Weizmann, who became the first president of Israel because he helped make it happen. Or books like the one called A Tzaddik in Our Time, which is about a man named Rabbi Aryeh Levin who spent his life doing Mitzvahs for others. Or one called Summoned to Jerusalem about a woman named Henrietta Szold, who started an organization called Hadassah which makes sure Israel has the best doctors and nurses for everyone who needs them.

Most of all, there are heroes everywhere in the world, and they are easy to find if you want to look for them.

Some people think that being famous like rock stars or stars on television or movie stars or famous basketball players makes someone a hero. Sometimes that is true, like football players who visit kids in the hospital or give away some of their money to buy uniforms and footballs for kids who don't have enough money to get their own.

Sometimes famous people pay for people to go to college if they can't afford it, or they send them to summer camp. There are even some baseball players who give away \$100 or more every time they make a home run. When famous people are famous and do Mitzvahs, then they are Mitzvah heroes, and those are the kinds of heroes I like most, because then their fans will want to do all kinds of Mitzvahs just like their heroes do.

But you don't have to be famous to be a Mitzvah hero. In fact, there are hundreds — even thousands — of Mitzvah heroes who are never in the newspapers or magazines or on TV and who never fill stadiums so people can come see them.

One of them is an eye doctor I know who sometimes goes to Mexico and helps some blind people get back their eyesight. He goes once or twice a year if he can, and he does it for free, because they do not have any money. Some of the Mitzvah heroes are accountants because they help people save money they need, and if the people can't pay for it, they do it for free. Some of the people own stores like clothing stores, and when they find out some people can't afford to buy a new suit, they secretly get them a suit and don't worry about being paid for it. Or they own an ice cream store, and when they find out there is going to be a party for kids who live in shelters, they give them gallons of ice cream, and they don't worry about being paid for it because they know it is a Mitzvah to make people happy, and they know kids love ice cream.

As you can see, some of these people use the way they make a living to do their Mitzvah work. But there are others, like lawyers who love to cook, who do their Mitzvah work by making wonderful meals for people who live all alone and are not well enough to cook for themselves. There's even someone I know who is a big shot on Wall Street, but what he enjoys doing the most is doing things like helping sick children get better or making sure everyone has enough Matzah and chicken and wine and cake for Passover.

Some of the Mitzvah heroes might be people you never met, and some of them might even be a relative, like one of your grandparents or your mother or father, or an uncle or aunt or cousin, or even a brother or sister.

Some of the Mitzvah heroes are short, and some of them are tall, and some are just medium size. It doesn't seem to matter what size you are when it comes to Mitzvahs. I have two friends who are at least six feet five inches tall who love to do all kinds of Mitzvahs, and, now that I think of it, I have at least three other friends who are about four feet ten who spend much of their time looking for ways to do more and more Mitzvahs.

Some of them are very old and some of them are very young and some are somewhere in the middle, maybe thirty-five or forty. I read about one young man who was about twelve years old who likes bicycles. He likes to get old beat-up bicycles and fix them up and paint them and then to give them away to kids who don't have one of their own.

Some of the Mitzvah heroes are rich and some of them don't have much money at all, and most of them are somewhere in between....They have enough money to live comfortably.

And some of them have all kinds of college degrees like a Master of Social Work or Law degree or something fancy like a Doctorate in Philosophy With a Special Interest in Ancient Egyptian Religion, Language, and Literature — such a long title! And there are many other Mitzvah heroes who never had a chance to go to college, but they use their minds and talents and whatever they learned in school to think of more ways to do things for others. Some of my favorites are people who just love to drive people wherever they need to go but can't get there because they don't have a car. And there are lots of them who always have people over for Shabbat dinner and nice meals for the holidays. Their houses are always full of guests, usually strangers who have come to town for the week end and have no place to go for Shabbat, or new people who have just moved in and haven't settled down in their new home yet. You don't really need to be a Doctor of

Philosophy With a Special Interest in Ancient Egyptian Religion, Language, and Literature to make a nice Shabbat or holiday meal for others.

Oh, there are thousands of Mitzvah heroes out there. There are thousands of people who just love to take all the time they can to take care of others. Some of them are famous people, and some of them do their work so quietly almost no one knows about them. And even some of the famous ones don't want to be famous because of their Mitzvah work. They just want to do the Mitzvahs because they are Mitzvahs. The only reason they want others to know about what they do is so the other people will want to do more Mitzvahs, too. They don't like the publicity, because they don't want to brag about their Mitzvah work.

And they are so easy to find. All you have to do is start asking people, "Who is doing good Mitzvahs?" or "Who is doing super Mitzvahs?" or "Who is doing awesome Mitzvahs?" You can ask your parents or your teachers or your rabbi or your friends. I am sure they will know one or two of them, or maybe more. Then all you have to do is meet them and start working with them. There's no need to wait until you are thirty-seven or forty or fifty-three.

You can start right now.

And that's where this Hebrew word "Chevra" comes in. It means "your group of friends", or "the people you hang out with." We have friends for all kinds of reasons: we like to talk with them or go to movies with them or have fun playing in the back yard with them. It is good to also have a Chevra which is your Mitzvah Chevra, the people you like to do Mitzvahs with. Having Mitzvah heroes in your Chevra, especially when you are young, gives you a good start. Even when you are very young, you can begin to do all kinds of wonderful things and learn about the many ways to do Mitzvahs. You won't have to wait till you are older to do so many of these Mitzvahs, like you have to wait to get your driver's license or the chance to vote for President.

You can start right now. Just start asking, "Who is doing good Mitzvahs?" or "Who is doing super Mitzvahs?" or "Who is doing awesome Mitzvahs?" and join them in their Mitzvah work.

It's easy. All you have to do is do it.

Big Time Mitzvahs

All kinds of things need fixing.

Sooner or later something somewhere breaks or breaks down or runs out of steam or gas or a battery just wears down. That's just the way things happen. Like a flat tire on a bicycle or a car. Or maybe

one of the plants in the living room ran out of water, and if someone doesn't remember to give it water, it will start turning brown and will droop and look bad.

It's the same thing with people. Sometimes they need fixing up, and Mitzvahs are like hammers and screwdrivers and wrenches that give us that extra ability to fix things up... And it's the same thing with the world. Sometimes the world is broken in big and small ways and needs to be fixed up. Every time someone is hungry and can't buy food, the world is broken. Or maybe someone is ready to go to college but there isn't enough money around to pay for it. When that happens, too, the world is a little broken. Or maybe two or three people in the neighborhood got sick and they need someone to come in and cook for them until they get better. If that happens, the world is also a little broken, and Mitzvahs can fix it up. In that case, bringing over some flowers or a plant when it is time to cook dinner, fixes things up even better.

When Mitzvahs are used to fix up the world, it is called Tikkun Olam, which means just that, "fixing up the world." And that means the better we get at doing Mitzvahs, the better fixer-uppers we are for the world when it needs to be fixed up.

Let's say one night you turn on the TV and nothing happens. It might be very easy to fix it: someone accidentally unplugged it. All you have to do is plug it in. But if the picture tube broke, that's something else. You need an expert. Just imagine the same thing with your computer. Plugging it in is really easy, but if one of the millions of circuits got messed up, you wouldn't want to try to work on it yourself. You really need to call someone who knows how to do it. It's not like changing a light bulb when it wears out. You really need someone who's been fixing these things for a long time. Or let's say it is time to do some errands, and when you get in the car with your Dad, he says, "We're low on gas." That's easy to fix. You go to the gas station and fill it up. But if you have a flat tire, that's a little harder, and, if for some reason something really big is wrong, like the transmission is a mess or somehow the radiator sprung a leak, well — those are big-time repairs, and you'll really need an expert to get the car running again just right.

Look around the house — you'll see lots of examples of fixing. Maybe the handle of a cup broke. A little glue could fix it, but, if someone dropped a plate and it broke into eight pieces, that's another story, or, if a bad storm came up and the roof started to leak or the basement flooded, those are big-time repairs.

It's the same thing with Tikkun Olam. The world needs all kinds of Mitzvahs to fix it. Up so it works just right, small Mitzvahs, medium ones, and big ones. Just think — if it's time to take the dog out for a walk, that's easy to do. Just get the leash, attach it to the dog's collar, and out you go for a stroll around the block. But if you worked at the zoo for the summer and it came time to wash and shampoo the giraffes, elephants, and hippos, you'd really need a lot of help, and you'd have to make sure someone knew just what kind of shampoo works best for each one of the animals.

With a broken world, you can think of people like Kenny Rogers, the singer, who asked people to bring cans of food to his concerts so the food bank could feed hungry people. Somewhere along the way they figure he had collected 2,000,000 pounds of food. That's pretty awesome Mitzvah work, but instead of saying, "I'll never do such big-time Mitzvahs", you could say, "Not yet."

Or you can think of Paul Newman, the actor, who has given away millions and millions of dollars from the sales of his salad dressing and popcorn and other foods you see on the shelf in the grocery store. Instead of saying, "I'll never be able to do that!" you can say, "Some day maybe I'll get there."

Or you can think of Ben and Jerry who give away thousands of pints of their ice cream for Mitzvah projects. Right now you might not think you can do anything that big, but, if you think big, you can say, "Some day I will move up to Big-Time Mitzvahs and I'll be able to do something like that." You could start now with one pint for a birthday party down at the shelter. Sooner or later you'll be able to manage a quart, and then a gallon, and maybe some day ten gallons, and then who knows how many gallons? Some day, sooner rather than later. If you begin working at Mitzvahs now, you get better and better at them as you get older, until you can get to the Big Time.

Look around the house again. Let's say one evening you start hearing funny sounds coming from the washing machine. After a while it starts spinning wildly and then goes Clunk and stops dead, with all kinds of wet clothes still inside. When the repair person

comes and fixes it, just remember that once, years ago, all he or she could probably do was plug it in if someone had unplugged it by mistake. It's just that with training and practice, he or she got better at it until there's no washing machine in the world that can't be fixed if they get their hands on it and used their skills. Maybe when they were younger and began to see they were good at fixing things they said, "Some day I'll be able to fix anything!"

It's the same with Tikkun Olam:

Think big.

Watch the Big-Time Mitzvah People just like you watch the baseball stars to see how to play baseball.

Start practicing now because even small and medium-sized Mitzvahs make a big difference.

And remember to say, "Not yet" when you see some Big Time Mitzvahs that people are doing. Some day you'll be doing them, too. You'll be a Big Time Fixer Upper for the world.

Just think of Kenny Rogers and his 2,000,000 pounds of food for the food banks, and Paul Newman's millions of Tzedakah dollars, and all those wonderful pints and quarts and gallons of ice cream Ben and Jerry have been giving away when it some needed ice cream for Big Time Mitzvahs.

Not quite yet. But with good training with the big-time Mitzvah people, and with practice, you'll probably be doing Big-Time Mitzvahs before you know it. Just start now with the small and medium-sized Mitzvahs and soon, very soon, you'll move into the Big Time.