

Yom Chesed

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NVHC Glance, April 2024

I imagine that my mail is like most of yours: LOTS of junk (wasteful!), a few bills (with more and more online), an occasional piece I need to open (everything from NVHC!), and the very infrequent handwritten envelope. Handwritten notes bring up an immense sense of gratitude in me. Gratitude for the sentiment expressed, of course, and even more so for the thought and time taken by another person to let me know that they are thinking of me, and to show me that they care.

That sense of relationship is what has always mattered to me most about a synagogue. Wherever I have lived, I have looked for a Jewish community to become a part of. Not because I am a Cantor – this goes back to long before I was a Cantor – but because the synagogue community becomes a built-in family. Many people talk about their ‘synagogue family’ with good reason. We become family when we feel each other’s prayers, burdens, and joys. It is who we are when we choose to break the walls between our private homes and reach out to each other in times of celebration, in times of need, and in times of grief. Together, we hold each other up through life's journeys.

We are coming into the part of our spiritual calendar that is the motif of journey itself. We are commanded to retell and relive the narrative of the Israelites leaving the slavery of Egypt, of a journey toward spiritual freedom and redemption. What always strikes me about this exodus is that the Israelites who actually left Egypt had to choose to do so. While God and Moses provided the exit path, no one was forced to go. In fact, there are many commentaries that suggest that many Israelites remained in Egypt. Embedded in the life journey of the Passover story is the essence of communal responsibility and connection that was necessarily cultivated among those who left. Their choice led them to become a people. In our day, belonging to and becoming involved in a synagogue community means never having to march alone, even to the very end.

As the Israelites journeyed out of Egypt, they found themselves in the wilderness learning how to care for one another. At this time of year, we are doing the same. Our connections to our community matter; both in challenges and celebrations, our people are here for each other in important life moments. These acts of *chesed* – lovingkindness – are at the core of what makes a synagogue community unique among all the other groups and communities

that we may be a part of. Acts of *chesed* are imbued with a sense of prayer, a sense of elevation, a sense of holiness.

On Sunday evening, April 28th at 7:00pm, we will celebrate NVHC's first **Yom Chesed** – a time to mark the end of the holiday of Pesach, the beginning of our spiritual journey toward freedom requiring acts of *chesed* to make it through. **Yom Chesed** in our community will be a prayerful, joyful, and reflective time to express gratitude for the opportunities we have to do *mitzvot* for each other. The evening will include prayer and song, *Yizkor*, Torah learning, testimonials of the power of acts of *chesed*, and honoring members of our community who have done acts of *chesed*. We will also participate in the creation of a *Megillat Chesed* – a scroll which will contain our written reflections about our own experiences of doing *chesed* for others. After **Yom Chesed**, we will be weaving the pieces that we write together into a beautiful scroll that will live in our ark, and that we plan to display during the High Holy Days, adding to it each year.

Chesed is a pillar of Jewish living. The familiar Talmudic words from Pirkei Avot 1:2 remind us:

עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חַסְדִּים :
“Al Shlosha d’varim ha’olam omeid: al Hatorah, al Ha’avodah v’al G’milut Chasadim.”

The world stands on three things: Torah, worship, and deeds of *chesed* – lovingkindness.

As we retell the journey of our people from Egypt to Sinai, and as we take our spiritual journey through the *Omer* (read Rabbi Barrett’s article!), we pray that our experience together of this unique *Yom Chesed* will help all of us there to deeply sense how ‘doing *chesed*’ is integral to our spiritual journey here at NVHC; how it helps us to weave and strengthen the tapestry of relationships which is our community.