

**Daniel Mark Siegel**  
Rabbi Mona Alfi  
Congregation B'nai Israel  
Yom Kippur 2010  
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In the evening of last May 2nd, the day of the Jewish Heritage Festival, as my family and I were leaving the Tower Cafe, we ran into a temple board member out on the sidewalk, on our way to the parking lot. He pointed down the block and told us to keep an eye out because at the corner of the building, right before the parking lot there was a rather tall and imposing homeless man, clearly drunk, staggering back and forth in the street, and waving his jean shirt in the air like a toreador at the cars going by. Our board member said that he didn't think the man was dangerous, but to keep an eye out because we were with the kids.

As we walked by and the man spoke to us, he calmed down quite a bit and wished us a good evening, and I wished him one as well. My eye level came to his bare chest, and as I looked up to say good evening to him, I saw a simple star of David tattooed on his skin, just over his heart, and as I looked at his face, I saw someone that would have looked at home in this temple, if only he was cleaned up a bit and fully dressed.

After we passed him I said to Glenn, I think he was Jewish. He asked me why I thought so, and I said him, "didn't you see the Jewish star tattooed on his chest?" He went back to talk to him, to see if there was anything we might be able to do. They spoke for several minutes.

Glenn asked him, if he was Jewish. The man smiled and then proudly said, "Of course! My name is Daniel Mark Siegel<sup>1</sup>." He then asked Glenn if he were Jewish too, and wanted to know where his people were from, and then with pride, he told Glenn that his family was from Lithuania, Russia and Romania.

He never asked us for anything as we walked by him with the children, he just said to us that he wanted us to know that not all homeless people are bad, or scary.

Glenn was very shook up by his encounter, a bit rattled by the idea that he was Jewish, and that he looked, well, he looked so much like *our* relatives. It was also unsettling that on a day when it felt like we had just come from a Jewish *shtetle*,

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Mark Siegel gave permission for his story to be told with his real name.

surrounded by thousands of Jews on the West Steps of the Capital, we came face to face with one Jew who was a world away from those who had come to gather and celebrate their Jewish heritage.

And here we were with this one Jew, who was literally wearing his identity on his chest, and so happy to find a landsman to talk with, proud that his name announced his Jewishness, eager to connect, and here we were and we could not figure out what to do to help him other than to give him a few dollars and gentle words and conversation.

That night Ezra asked how come we couldn't take him to the synagogue to help him. Out of the mouth of babes. It was a good question, and I was sad that I did not have a good answer for him.

A few generations ago had we run into someone like Daniel, we could have done just that. Either the local synagogue would have been able to put him up for the night, or after the evening prayers someone would have taken him home, provided a meal, a place for him to wash up and a place to lay his head, a safe place for him to dry out.

Perhaps a local merchant would have found odd jobs for him to do, and the community *pushke*, or *tzedakah* fund could have helped him as well.

But here we are, a hundred and sixty one years in Sacramento, and as a community we have come so far. We are, for the most part, safe and prosperous. But our ability to help individuals or families in need is limited to being able to offer reduced dues, religious school scholarships and a food closet.

But what *can* we offer those in our midst who are truly suffering?

And I am not just asking about the Daniel Siegel's in our world whose life has hit an extreme low, but also the families who are struggling to keep their homes, who are burdened by furloughs, or live paycheck to paycheck.

There was nothing about Daniel Siegel that made him any more, or any less, worthy than any other person who is homeless. But to look into his face and see someone who is not that much older than I am, with the same last name as my grandfather, the same name as one of our temple members, and to think that someone once held *him* at a bris and chose *his* name as lovingly as I chose my sons names, it felt like I had encountered a long lost relative sleeping on the street.

That night that we met him, Ezra wrestled with the idea of how someone could become homeless. He said to me, “I think I know how it must have happened, his parents must have died, and then there wasn’t anyone around who saw that he needed help.”

I wanted to cry at the sweetness and simplicity of how he saw the situation. Ezra simply could not understand how someone who had once been part of a community, or part of a family, could end up on the street, alone.

Both Glenn and I were shook up about meeting Daniel, wondering what his story was, how did he come to be outside the Tower Cafe that night. And over the next month, Glenn tried to find him again. Several weeks later, Glenn was driving home and saw him panhandling out under the freeway on 16th Street.

He called out to him from the window “Daniel Mark Siegel!” Daniel turned around startled and stunned. Glenn invited him into the car so they could talk. He said that it had been years since someone had called out his name like that.

As they spoke Glenn learned that Daniel had grown up in Piedmont, his family had gone to Beth Jacob in Oakland, and he was proud to say that there were 400 people at his Bar Mitzvah.

He said to Glenn “Did you know there were poor Jewish people?” Glenn said yes, and Daniel replied “Yeah but there aren’t a lot of homeless Jews.”

Glenn asked Daniel for permission for me to tell his story at Yom Kippur, with his real name. All he has is his name and his story, and he generously gave both to us to share with you.

I don’t know the full details of how Daniel went from Piedmont to living under the freeway on 16th Street, but I do know that he like every person who is living on the street has a story to tell. And I know that they have a need to be seen as people.

And we have a religious imperative that demands us to treat each person with dignity and compassion<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 19:9-10, Leviticus 25:35-36, Deuteronomy 15:7-8

The morning after we met him, I got on my computer to check email. I read the weekly Torah commentary sent out by the URJ to see if I could get any ideas for my *drash* that week. And what was the topic of the teaching? It was titled “Finding the Tzedek in Tzedakah”<sup>3</sup> and talked about our responsibilities to the poor and the homeless.

I want to say right now, that it all happened just as I’m telling you. And I felt as though I was getting a heavenly nudge telling me to pay attention and do something.

Part of me wondered if Daniel Siegel might not actually be Elijah the prophet in disguise.

Jewish tradition teaches us that Elijah the prophet is destined to wander the earth as a heavenly emissary. He appears in many disguises, he is the protector of those without hope, he is a guardian of the ill and of newborns. He appears as a beggar and a peasant, as a Jew, and as a non-Jew. And God has given him the responsibility to announce the coming of the *mashiach*, the coming of redemption. This is why Elijah is invited to every *bris* and to every *seder*.

There is a special empty chair that is set aside for Elijah at a *Brit Milah* because our tradition teaches that every child has the potential to be the one who brings peace into the world. And we invite Elijah to be there, just in case it happens to be our child who will be the anointed one. To be honest, what Jewish mother doesn’t think it’s going to be here kid?

But the way and the reason that Elijah is invited to our *seder* table is a little different. We set out a cup of wine for him, and at the beginning of the *seder* we are supposed to call out: “All who are hungry, let them enter and eat. All who are in need, let them come celebrate *Pesach*.” While on one level we are inviting Elijah, on another more tangible level, we are inviting whoever is homeless or hungry to come in and share our meal with us. Because perhaps the stranger who is sharing our *seder* with us is, in fact, Elijah in disguise.

Because as we are also taught, that when Elijah is not at a *bris* or visiting our homes on *Passover*, he is wandering the world dressed as a beggar, taking our society’s temperature, seeing if we are ready for redemption.

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Joe Rooks Rappaport, Ten Minutes of Torah, URJ.org

We are being judged not by how we pray, or how pious we are, but how we treat the most vulnerable in our society. Prayer and piety is only important if when we leave *these* walls it continues to impact our behavior and how we treat one another. Elijah is testing us by seeing if our actions match our words.

At a bris, we put out a chair for Elijah, and at Passover, we're on good behavior, but that is because we know he's coming. But how do we act when we're not sure if the person on the side of the freeway exit is a person on the side of the freeway exit, or an emissary from God. If you thought the homeless person asking for help *was* truly Elijah the Prophet, would you treat him differently? If the homeless person asking for help, was someone you knew or recognized, would you treat them with more compassion?

Why? Aren't we *all* created in the image of God, aren't we all from the same family, all of us descendants of Adam?

Elijah comes down in the form of a beggar to judge where we are as a society - are we ready for redemption, or is there still work to be done, are there lessons still to be learned? Judaism teaches us that a society is measured by how we treat those who can not protect themselves. We are only considered worthy of redemption if we are actively trying to bring it into our world ourselves.

Our Torah, our Talmud, our entire tradition is clear - each of us has an *obligation* to do what we can, not just for Daniel Siegel, but for everyone in our midst who is in need of help.

The Jewish laws on tzedakah are about as detailed and extensive as the US Tax Code. And depending on how your Aramaic is, it might be as easy to decipher. But I'll give you some highlights.

Tzedakah is not charity - it is not an optional act, it is not dependent on what mood we are in. Jewish law and Jewish tradition is clear on this - tzedakah is a mitzvah - a commandment, and we are all *chayav* - we are *obligated* to give.

Ideally, we give generously, and with an open heart, and both the recipient and the donor are anonymous. But the rabbis are less concerned about how you feel about giving, and more concerned that you give as much as you should, and without embarrassment to the recipient, and ideally, what you are giving is a job or an opportunity for the person to land on their feet.

And while each individual is obligated to give, we are also taught that the ultimate responsibility for caring for the poor extends to the entire community.

In Maimonides legal writings on the laws of giving to the poor, he wrote that “in every town where there exists a Jewish community, the members of that community are *chayavim*, obligated, to appoint tzedakah collectors, well-known, trustworthy persons who shall make the rounds each Friday, collecting from each individual the sum that is appropriate for him to give and that has been officially imposed upon him.”<sup>4</sup>

In fact, other writings make it clear that if one does not give tzedakah, or gives less than is appropriate, the Jewish courts can coerce the individual, even physically coerce him, or attach his assets, until what was considered appropriate was given.<sup>5</sup> What is described is kind of a cross between the IRS, a Mafia enforcer, and a Federation Pledge Drive Chairperson.

In terms of what is considered appropriate, the Shulchan Aruch, a medieval code of Jewish law, says that if one can afford it, one gives tzedakah “according to the needs of the poor”; and if one cannot afford that amount, one gives a fixed portion of one’s income.<sup>6</sup> But we are not supposed to give so much that we ourselves will be driven into poverty.<sup>7</sup>

Either way, taking care of the poor rested on all of our shoulders, not just those who felt like giving.

The laws about the distribution of tzedakah are also important. But the two that are of particular import are these.

First, the Torah teaches us that we are to give to the person who is in need enough so that it is “sufficient for whatever he needs (Deut. 15:8).” In other words, the focus is on the person who is in need, and their needs dictate what is to be done for them.

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<sup>4</sup> CCAR Journal, Spring 2010, p. 48-49, quoting Yad, Matanot Aniyim 9:1

<sup>5</sup> CCAR Journal, Spring 2010, p. 49, quoting Yad, Matanot Aniyim 7:10, Shulchan Arukh Yoreh De’ah 248:1

<sup>6</sup> CCAR Journal, Spring 2010, p. 56, footnote 16, Shulchan Arukh Yoreh De’ah 249:1

<sup>7</sup> B. Ketubot 50a

Another guiding principal is that the communal obligation to help the poor is clear, we are not to just help the Jewish poor - but rather all who are in need. The Talmud teaches: “We support the indigent of the non-Jews with the indigent of the Jews.”<sup>8</sup>

In other words, when it comes to helping those in need, we do not make distinctions in regards to religion or ethnicity. If someone needs help, we are obligated to help.

I believe that the rabbis taught us that Elijah disguises himself as a beggar or a peasant to remind us that each person has intrinsic value - each person can be the one who brings about our redemption, and could be a Divine emissary.

But when we refuse to look at a person in need, refuse to assist them, or to be in their presence, it is to our detriment. Redemption comes in many ways. Perhaps there is a child right now, who given the opportunity to go to school might create a cure for cancer? Perhaps the homeless man talking to himself on the street corner used to study music at Juilliard and is actually a musical genius.

Or perhaps the homeless person you passed on your way here tonight is trying to get enough food together to feed his family. Perhaps the elderly person sitting huddled on the side of the street had a pension that was wiped out by the current economic downturn. Or the woman pushing a cart felt that it was better to be on the street than in an abusive relationship. Every person has a story. Every person is worthy of our community’s attention and assistance.

At first Glenn’s intention was to help Daniel, and he did. He helped him connect with social services, bought him a backpack and a sleeping bag and helped him to get at least get one week in a low-rent hotel. The only thing that Daniel actually asked for was a *siddur*.

But in the end, it was Daniel who gave so much more to Glenn, helping him understand in a new way what it meant to be truly vulnerable, to be human, to be Jewish, and to feel like the “other.”

This year we will be putting up two tzedakah boxes at the temple, one in the foyer of the sanctuary and the other will be at the entrance of the Library and office building.

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<sup>8</sup> BT, Gittin 61a

The donations in the tzedakah box in the sanctuary foyer will go to support our temple and the special funds that provide camp and religious school scholarships, enable us to be involved in interfaith work, to support the temple so we can have the policy that no one is ever turned away because they can't pay full dues, and the many other funds that we have set up through the temple.

The tzedakah box in the entrance of the Library and office building, will be to collect for different causes outside the temple, and the causes will change periodically. It will be a way for us to pool our pennies and our dollars so that collectively we can have an impact and help the larger community in which we live.

Our board has been talking all year about how we as a congregation can effectively help the homeless in Sacramento. I am so proud that one of the ways we have gotten involved is by becoming one of the Sacramento area congregations that participates in Family Promise.

Family Promise is a faith based national organization that helps families that have lost their homes stay together, and stay safe, as they develop the skills and resources they need to live independently again. Family Promise provides families with food, shelter, support and education so that they can rebuild their lives while staying together.

About a month ago B'nai Israel hosted three families for a week. Three families that inspired all of our volunteers who so generously donated bedding, meals and hospitality here at the temple during their week with us.

While so many people were involved in this, in particular I want to thank Sandy Kaufman and Bob Nelson who did such an amazing job in coordinating our many volunteers and making it possible for us to participate in Family Promise.

We will be hosting Family Promise again in April, and anyone who would like to participate in any way should keep their eyes open for more emails from Sandy and Bob about when and how they can volunteer.

As I said on Erev Rosh Hashanah, the Talmud teaches us that "one may do more, another may do less, but both are acceptable, as long as the heart is directed to heaven (Berakhot 17a)."

We are not all going to feel comfortable giving in the same way, or to the same cause, we are not all able to give the same amount, but we all must give *something*. Jewish law teaches that even those who are receiving tzedakah have an obligation to give something, because we are all part of a community, and no one in the community is exempt from helping others.

Even those who need help, also need to have the opportunity to give of themselves. Even though Daniel Siegel didn't have much, he had his name and his story, two things he was happy to share hoping that it might help someone else. And he had one other thing.

After Glenn bought him those basic supplies. Daniel gently leaned over to him and kissed him on the top of his head, and Daniel said with a sweet smile on his face, "that is how my grandfather used to kiss me." It was the most sincere gesture of gratitude Glenn had ever received.

There are so many ways for us to help. You can volunteer with Family Promise, or at Loaves and Fishes, Mustard Seed School or Mary House. Donate your gently used clothing, or furniture to Good Will. Give \$18 or \$1800 to one of the many scholarship funds here at the temple to help our own families who are suffering financially but want to make sure that their children are able to participate in Jewish life.

If you haven't done it already, fill up a grocery bag with dry goods and bring it back with you tonight, for us to give to the Downtown Food Basket. Or simply find a cause that you believe in that helps the homeless or the hungry or the economically vulnerable, and either volunteer or donate money to that cause. However much time, or however much you can afford, give of yourself.

One of the tell tale signs of a Jewish home is a tzedakah box. It is traditional that just before Shabbat one should put some coins in the *pushke*. It is a mitzvah that I would encourage all of us to take on. And then when your tzedakah box is full, donate the money to a cause that you believe in. It is something simple that each of us can do to make a difference.

And if you have children, do this with them, *show* them how to help those who need us. Model for them what it means to do acts of tzedek, acts of righteousness, so that they will understand that tzedakah is not charity, it is not optional, but it is simply what we do.

And if you don't currently have a tzedakah box, you need only walk over to the temple gift-shop where they currently have a wonderful selection that fits every budget and every home decor.

We no longer have a community *kupah* or collection agency, that operates the way it did in generations past, but I urge you in this coming year to make a personal commitment to putting aside money each week. Find a worthy organization that you want to give to, and every week, before Shabbat begins, just empty the change out of your pockets or purse and put it into your tzedakah box.

And each time you come to temple, try to remember to bring a non-perishable food item with you for the food pantry. Or read the Koleinu to see what mitzvah projects our B'nai Mitzvah students are working on. They are often engaged in helping the poor and needy in our midst and provide us with many opportunities where we can help as well.

At the High Holidays we are judged, not only as individuals, but by the sum total of our actions as a community.

What we do matters. When we act with compassion and kindness *we* become the redeemers of our world

When we turn a blind eye to the world's problems and say that's not *my* problem, we condemn our world with indifference and inaction, permitting it to decay and dissolve into chaos and coldness.

Normally, I don't like citing statistics in a sermon, but these numbers are important and sobering, and facts we need to hear. Currently 14.3% of the American population is living in poverty, that is roughly 1 in 7 people.

In 2009, approximately 170,000 families spent time in homeless shelters.<sup>9</sup> Another study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture reveals that the number of U.S. households that can not consistently put food on their table rose to 17 million households, or 14.6% of all households in 2008.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 2009 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress

<sup>10</sup> USA Today, "Breakfast in Class...fight against kids hunger starts at school." September 14, 2010

These are the worst statistics our country has seen since 1959 when our government began to keep records on poverty.<sup>11</sup>

But it's important to remember that we are not talking about statistics. We are talking about people. Behind every one of those numbers are men, women and children, who are either struggling to keep their homes or who have already lost them. Men, women, and children, who have to wonder if they will have enough food to eat on any given day.

The people who are suffering are our friends, our neighbors, our relatives, and even our fellow congregants. As the rabbi of your congregation, I can tell you that some of those who are suffering and afraid, are sitting with us right now.

As Rabbi Tarfon taught us: *lo alecha hamlecha ligmor* - we are not obligated to fix everything - but we are obligated to do something. Each of us is capable of alleviating someone else's suffering in some way.

When we buy new school supplies or new socks and underwear for our kids, if we can afford it, buy a little extra for someone who can't afford it. When we have *simcha*, budget in 3% to give to MAZON or any organization that combats hunger.

The best way to honor and give thanks to God for the blessings you have been given is to put prayer into action and to offer help to someone else, to share your blessings with others.

And if you yourself are in need of help, don't forget, your assistance is needed as well. Even if you don't have much money, you might give time or a kind word to share with others. You can visit the sick, participate in a shiva minyan, or volunteer for an organization engaged in tikkun olam.

It has been several months since either Glenn or I talked to Daniel. But we think of him often. We look for him when we get off the 16th Street exit off of HWY 80, or drive by the Tower Cafe.

Part of me still wonders if he was indeed Elijah. But part of me knows, it doesn't matter, it is enough that he is Daniel. And that is enough of a reason for us to help him, and to help anyone who need us.

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<sup>11</sup> Allison Linn, MSNBC.com, September 16, 2010

Glenn and I were both reminded by Daniel that the story of redemption is one that goes in two directions. When one works to redeem society, we are also given the opportunity to redeem ourselves.