

## "GOD'S UNFINISHED BUSINESS"

Sermon Delivered by Rabbi Harry K. Danziger  
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She was reared as one of four children, but now she's the only one left. She is more than 70 years old. She always lived with a brother or a sister, but now in her seventies, for the first time in her life, she lives alone. She never married, though she has nieces and nephews, mostly in other communities, but no sons and no daughters. She is, thank God, in good health, and her faculties are sharp. But she is very much alone. She makes no demands on anyone, and if there is a cry of aloneness, it is a cry that must be felt rather than heard. She lives off the beaten track. She does not live in the B'nai B'rith Home nor in Plough Towers, nor in one of the apartments or enclaves of older Jewish adults. I know about her, but I have to confess to you that I know about scores of people who are in more immediate need. If she were to go to the hospital, then presumably her name would appear on a list, and then the rabbis or cantor would visit her. But then she would leave the hospital and, even though we would know of her loneliness and her need, there would be new names the next week on a new list, and she would disappear from view. And yet we know that a phone call, a note, a visit, an offer of a ride would transform her life from mere existence to real living.

Tonight I want to tell you about a few people in our congregation, fictional as I tell them to you, factual in reality. I want to share with you some of the things I know.

People say to me or to Rabbi Rosenfeld, Rabbi Parr, or Cantor Kaplan at this time of year, "You must be very busy preparing for the Holidays." Sure. There are sermons to write, music to prepare, courses to plan, projects to undertake. But as I enter my twentieth year as a congregational rabbi, I'll tell you what comes to me most as the Holidays roll around. Each year at this time, and more every year, I become aware of my limitations. I become aware of the limitations of myself

or two rabbis or three or ten -- of the limitations of a Temple staff be it three as we were in Monroe (secretary, rabbi and custodian), or many as we are here. And with that awareness of limitation comes a sense of guilt. One thing you learn as rabbi of a large congregation, or for that matter a small one, is that there are so many people in need of just a moment, just a touch, just a thought, and you won't have a chance to do it. If the path to hell is, in fact, paved with good intentions, then the congregational rabbis of America are the champion road builders of the entire universe. I could sit down in my study on any given day and make a list of people, let alone those I have forgotten, who really are in need of just a touch, and I know that they're not going to get it. Not because we don't want to, but because we're limited. And so we feel guilty. We realize, you see, that when God finished creating the world after those six days in tradition, He left a lot of work unfinished. When He looked at the world, He said, lilt is very good, " but He didn't say it was perfect. And we realize from the vantage point that we have, some of that unfinished business. It can be the cruelty of cancer ,devouring a person cell by cell; it can be the lightning strike of a heart attack that suddenly tears apart a family; it can be loneliness of bereavement or the pain of divorce; it can be the joyous expectation, followed by the diagnosis of birth defect; it can be the horror of an accident that leaves an innocent person maimed or dead. We as rabbis see how much there is among us, in our congregational family , of God's unfinished business. I could spend this sermon, and your time, talking about the great question of the ages: Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do bad things happen to any people? But the fact is that they do, and you will have to read a book to find out why, if that book can answer it.

What's more important is that they are clear and present evidence of God's unfinished business. But I believe that you and I, in this sanctuary, at this service, have the power to do God's unfinished business. For His unfinished business is not finding a cure for cancer. Most of us don't have those tools. His unfinished

business is not simply finding ways to prevent accidents. Most of us are not capable of that. But His real unfinished business is that He gave to humanity existence, and you and I have the power to give life to people, and if we do it, and if we draw on the enormous reservoir of power that is in this room, then we will make ourselves a kehila kedosha -- a holy congregation -- a mishpacha -- a real congregational family.

The two of them have lived together "for 40 years as husband and wife. They've never had a great deal; they worked hard together in a business from early in the morning till late at night; they had few friends, there was not time for making friends. They share a small and modest apartment, and they have modest needs. She has been diagnosed with a debilitating, not killing, illness. And so she needs constant care. Hired companions and care-givers are out of the question, there is no money. He must be with her. Their devotion to each other is deep and inspiring, but, more and more, he needs the opportunity to get out of the house, for an hour or two, and into a world for which he is still equipped. But there's no one to stay. If she goes into the hospital, the rabbis and cantor will hear of it and visit. But when she leaves the hospital, there will be other people in the hospital to visit, and there will be Bar and Bat Mitzvah students in the afternoon, classes to teach, weddings (thank God), and funerals (God forbid). And she and he will get lost in that little apartment. But, in this sanctuary, there are people who have an hour or two and a drivers license and a car, and they could do God's unfinished business by bringing real life where there is only existence. There are people in this sanctuary who, with the power of their index finger and the capacity to dial seven digits, could bring ten minutes or twenty or a half hour of real life and caring into a place which is simply a place of survival, and when you do that, you do God's unfinished business.

She lost her husband after a long illness. Or, perhaps it was that he lost his wife suddenly and without warning. In the course of a year in Temple Israel, I assure you, it was both. She is not young, she is not old. He may be 25, 35, 55 or 75, it doesn't matter, because when a person has lost a life's partner, a

luxurious home or a modest apartment that was once full, is now empty. Age doesn't matter. The widow begins to find out that the situation is not one of arithmetic; that two minus one does not leave half of what was there before. And now there is an emptiness. When the call comes after a death, the rabbi and the cantor visit. They attempt to bring comfort and help at the funeral, but there's another funeral the next week, and there's another hospital to visit. But that aloneness stays. And when the nights in December get long and the days get short, then sometimes the night seems like a black prison with bars of darkness at every window. And when Rosh Hashanna and Pesach come, what was once a happy time, is at best, bittersweet, and the more the loneliness, the more the bitter, the less the sweet. The rabbi and cantor care, but they have gone to do other business, elsewhere.

But in this sanctuary, in every row of this sanctuary, there are those who with the hand with which they write their monthly bills, the hand with which they tune their television set, the hand with which they grip their tennis racquet have the power to write a note that says, "We're thinking of you, you're not alone." For the price of a simple casserole, you can do God's unfinished business, making existence into life.

The child is eight or nine or ten years old, or twelve or fourteen, but his home is not the home that most of us saw in our textbooks at school. At least when I was in school, a textbook family was always a textbook family, whether it was Dick and Jane, or Bob and Alice, or whoever, it was Mommy, Daddy, brother and sister, no more, no less. But not every home is a textbook home. Sometimes it's a bitter divorce; other times it's a tragic illness, a death, and that home becomes quite literally a "broken home." And there are experts who can talk to the child about why something happened. And the parents can tell and reassure a child that he or she still loves him or her, but for the price of a movie ticket, or by going just a little out of the way, on your way to the game room or the mall, or the Chicks game, someone can say to that child, "If you count, and we care. Share our fun."

You don't have to be twenty-five years old or seventy-five years old to do God's unfinished business. You can be eight or ten or twelve, especially if your parents can say to you: "Why don't you call so-and-so, " and you are able to say, "What a good idea." You can add life where there is unfinished business.

God's unfinished business may be the nuclear weapons race, but I have no confidence that it will be solved in this congregation. God's unfinished business may be the economy of Memphis and its need for growth and jobs. I have little confidence that it will be solved in this congregation. God's unfinished business may be the matter of race; I hope we will contribute, but it won't be solved in this congregation. And even Israel's problems, though we may give support, cannot be solved by those who sit in this sanctuary. So I prefer to think big, by thinking small, about those things which ~ be solved by those who sit in this sanctuary.

I ask you to join me in doing God's unfinished business. Most of you will find cards in the book rack in front of you. And if I say you will find a pledge card, you will be either angry or frightened, but you needn't be. I don't ask for anybody's money. I ask for your lips, your time, your hands, your heart. If you decide to fill out that card, which you can mail to me or put in a box outside the sanctuary, or bring tomorrow or bring on Yom Kippur, I promise you that you will have the chance to do something you can do, that doesn't require an act of Congress or state legislature or funding; God's unfinished business.

And don't worry. Some people worry that someone won't accept a call from strangers. Let me tell you, when you're alone, the person who cares just isn't a stranger. Some of you may worry that the person we identify as someone who needs you, doesn't want to be identified as someone who needs. Well, I'm more worried that no one will identify their need. The process I suggest is new, but the idea is old, and with it I close.

Our rabbis looked around the world long ago, those rabbis who shaped Judaism, and said: "What a horrible place. What a place of trouble. People cruel to others, war, violence, hatred, cruelty, exploitation. It's a wonder that God doesn't destroy the whole business as a bad job." But the rabbis couldn't end with that because Judaism affirms this world. And so they developed a legend, a legend of the lamed vav tzadikim, the 36 righteous. And they said (you don't have to believe me) that there were in this world at any given moment, 36 unknown, unheralded, unsung righteous people, people who spent their lives simply doing acts of loving kindness for others. And that when God looked at the world, with its cruelty and its violence, wars and hatred, He said: "If there are 36 tzadikim — 36 righteous -- doing acts of lovingkindness, the world should be saved."

I suggest to you that in this sanctuary there are 36 people able and ready to be tzadikim -- not to save the whole world; not even to save the whole Jewish people; not even to save the whole state of Tennessee, but to begin to save ourselves. I suggest to you that there is the power in this congregation, beyond the pocketbook, beyond the wallet, beyond the checkbook, to do God's unfinished business, to bring life where there is only existence. Give us 36 tzadikim, or 72, and we will begin to do God's work.

I didn't end this way in the first service because I thought of it between services, and I'll share it with you. I walked through the building, and it reminded me that when out-of-towners come to Temple Israel, they say, "I can't get over your building. It's the most beautiful temple I've ever seen," as I believe it is. For those who sign those cards, and if we call on you and we give you the opportunity that we should, we will then be able to say to those out-of-towners who say, "I can't get over your building. It's the most gorgeous temple in the world," "If you think our house is beautiful, you ought to see the people who live here." Amen.