

A Sermon in Honor of the Retirement of Andrea Leopold and the Graduation of Evan Sendrow

My friends, this past week our son, Evan, graduated from the Indiana University School of Social Work. I was introduced to the Dean before the graduation, and he told me he was going to speak on making a difference, which is also my topic tonight. When he went on to say some very complimentary things about Evan, I decided to open up to him. I told him about how Evan's life started. Evan never learned English from hearing, the way children usually do. He was taught English by his speech therapist, just as if you or I were taught to speak Portuguese. I also shared some of the other challenges that Evan worked so hard to overcome. I told him that Evan became a social worker so that he could help children who had a difficult start in life because there were people who helped him when he had a difficult start in life. Evan was going to make a difference. As I spoke, I noticed a tear in the corner of the Dean's eye. Needless to say, I was deeply touched.

When the Dean began his speech, he spoke movingly of his own son and how his son had made a difference to people. Then he revealed his son's severe developmental disabilities. He lived

only thirty years, and “never learned what one plus one is.” He had many other challenges as well. But he was able to make nonverbal connections to people, and that, said the Dean, was how his son made a difference in people’s lives.

After the ceremony, Arlene spoke to the Dean. She told him how moved we all were by his talk about the newly graduated social workers making a difference in the world, and how especially moved we were by his words about his son. I was stunned by the Dean’s response. He told her that he was not sure whether to speak about his son, but he decided he would after his conversation with me. He told Arlene, “Your husband inspired me.”

I inspired him? Perhaps Evan’s story inspired him, or perhaps my listening to him tell me about his son inspired him. If it was the latter, then all I really did was listen, but if I say so myself, I’m a very good listener. Listening to someone in order to understand him or her, as opposed to listening in order to formulate a response may be a small thing, but small things make a difference.

This past Wednesday, our administrator for the past six plus years retired. During her time working for Shaarey Tefilla,

Andrea made a difference. She made a lot of differences. How? I couldn't begin to know all the ways. So often, it is not the big, publicly known things that make a difference to people. It can be a listening ear, a supportive shoulder, or a genuinely congratulatory hug. I cannot possibly know all of the little things that Andrea did to make a difference, but that's all right. What matters is those for whom she made a difference know.

Andrea plans to spend her retirement seeing the United States with Brett in their RV. There is a traditional Jewish prayer that you should carry with you in that RV, Andrea, a prayer called *Tefillat HaDerech*, literally the Prayer of the Way, known in English as the Traveler's Prayer. *Tefillat HaDerech* is not a prayer one says for someone else. It is a prayer that you should recite at the beginning of each new journey. But thanks to the musical genius of Roger McGuinn of the Byrds, who recorded the following as a song, I know a traditional Irish blessing that is perfectly suited to this new phase of life you are about to begin with Brett. Before I conclude my talk with this blessing, I will ask you and Brett to please rise at your seats:

May the road rise to meet you;

May the wind be at your back;

May the sun shine warm upon your land.  
May the rain fall soft upon your face,  
and until we meet again,  
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.