



Little Books of Big Questions
Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

Ruth had been silent for a long while. Suddenly she looked up and said, with a sad kind of passion, 'I've been listening to everything you've said. But what can we do? The problems are so great and we're so small. What difference can one person make to problems that are deep and global and made by millions of people thinking and acting the way they do?'

Nothing we can do will make a difference. So why try?

Don't believe for one moment that you can't make a difference. It isn't so. Let me tell you a story. Back in the early 1960s, Washington DC was a very racially segregated city. There was a young black boy, Stephen Carter who, together with his family, moved into a white neighbourhood. They were among the first black families to do so.

The first morning he and his brothers and sisters sat on the front step of the house, waiting to see how they would be greeted. They weren't. People ignored them. It was clear that no one wanted them there.

Many years later, Carter wrote about how he felt. 'I knew we shouldn't have come here. We aren't welcome. We won't be accepted. We don't belong. We will never belong.' In the middle of these thoughts, he was interrupted by the sight of a woman on the other side of the road. She waved at the children, gave them a smile, then disappeared into a house. A few minutes later she reappeared with a tray laden with food and drinks. She brought it over to the children and, still with a smile, told them how pleased she was to see them.

That moment, said Carter, changed my life. Suddenly he realised he could belong. Carter went on to become a professor of law at Yale University and one of America's most distinguished writers on politics. In a book he wrote about the effect of that one act, he spoke about the woman who had made such a difference to his life, who had died tragically young. Her name, he said, was Sarah Kestenbaum. He added (Carter is a Lutheran) that it was no accident that she was religious, and Jewish. Jews, he said, have a name for what she did: *chessed*, kindness, especially to strangers, especially when it's hard.

That episode took place in the 1960s. A few years ago I was giving a talk in a Washington synagogue and I happened to tell that story. Someone came up to me afterwards and said that Sarah Kestenbaum used to be a member of this synagogue. 'I hadn't heard that story', he added, 'but yes, that's the kind of thing Sarah used to do.'

One act, one moment, can change a life. Never believe you can't make a difference. You can.

Alright, there can be exceptions. But how often do they happen? And what difference do they really make?

As Jews, we believe that 'a single life is like a universe'. Change a life and you begin to change the world. In Judaism we believe in the absolute value of the individual. To God we each count, and count separately. Therefore, because problems are made by individuals, they can be solved by individuals. That is where change takes place.

The Rambam, Moses Maimonides, says that we have to act each day as if our lives were evenly poised between good and evil, and as if the world were also evenly poised. Our next act will tilt the balance. Our fate and the fate of the world depend on what we do next. Now it can be hard to think like this all the time. But the Rambam is telling us that we should never think that what we do is insignificant. It isn't. Often we never realise the impact we have on other people.

One kind word, one smile, can give hope to someone on the brink of despair. That, for example, is what I learned from Holocaust survivors.

What would be an example today?

Darfur. What demoralised the victims of the Holocaust was the feeling that the world knew and didn't care. They couldn't understand how a crime of that magnitude could take place without someone, somewhere, doing something. That, more than anything else, made them feel abandoned and alone.

A slow genocide is taking place in Darfur and we have to protest. Protests make a difference. Public awareness grows. Politicians ask questions. Television documentaries get made. International pressure mounts. Governments back down. It takes time, hard work, effort and commitment, but eventually others take up the cause and things happen.

One campaign, started by Jewish students in Britain, brought about one of the most remarkable developments in recent political history. After the Six Day War in 1967, many Russian Jews wanted to go to Israel. Russia under communist rule was hostile to Israel. The Jews who wanted to leave found themselves losing their jobs and subjected to harassment. In some cases – most famously Natan Sharansky – they were imprisoned. They were known as 'refuseniks'.

Jewish students in Britain took up their cause: it was called the Soviet Jewry Campaign. Eventually it spread to the United States. Jews throughout America became involved. Bar and bat mitzvahs were twinned with Jewish children in Russia. People handed out leaflets in their neighbourhoods, explaining the refuseniks' plight. Rallies were organised. Leading senators and congressmen were enlisted.

Eventually more than a million Jews were enabled to leave Russia and go to Israel: 200,000 in the 1970s, the rest in the 1990s. It was one of the most successful campaigns in modern history and had a huge effect on both Israel and Russia. I was a student when the campaign began. I saw how a handful of Jewish students started a process that became a snowball and then an avalanche. If I ever doubted that individuals can make a difference, that campaign convinced me otherwise.

So what is your message to Jewish students today?

There is a story that had a major impact on me. In the summer of 1968 a British Jewish student spent his vacation in America. The weeks leading up to the Six Day War, when it seemed as if Israel might be facing destruction, had shaken him. Besides which, he was studying philosophy, and in those days philosophers took a dim view of religion. He had many questions about Jewish identity and faith, and he wanted to discuss them with people who had thought them through.

He knew there were distinguished Jewish thinkers in America, so the next summer he went there, bought a Greyhound bus ticket and travelled from city to city, tracking down the great rabbis mentioned in a survey he had read in an American Jewish journal. They all had interesting things to say, but many of them mentioned the name of the man they thought was the greatest rabbi of the time, the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

So the student travelled to the Rebbe's headquarters in Brooklyn. He told people there that he wanted to see the great man. They laughed. There are thousands of people who want to see the Rebbe, they said. It will take months to organise a meeting. The student asked them to ask the Rebbe nonetheless, and left them phone numbers and addresses where they could contact him.

Eventually the call came through one Sunday night: the Rebbe can see you on Thursday. The student travelled non-stop for three days on a bus from Los Angeles to New York, and eventually found himself in the Rebbe's office. He asked the Rebbe his questions. The Rebbe answered them. Then the Rebbe turned the conversation around. 'What are you doing', he asked, 'for Jewish students at your university?' The student was disoriented. He wasn't a leader. He wasn't particularly involved. But the Rebbe kept challenging him, telling him he could make a difference.

The student returned to university, but the Rebbe's challenge stayed in his mind. He had never intended to get involved in Jewish life, beyond turning up. But someone had given him a task, and it kept beating at the door of his consciousness. Eventually the student did get involved. He became president of the university Jewish society. Several years later he trained to become a rabbi. Later still he became a Chief Rabbi. I was that student.

I became a leader not because I wanted to but because someone made me realise that the Jewish future depended on us – on me and the members of my generation. And I made myself the promise that one day I would challenge Jewish students the way the Rebbe had challenged me. I am not a rebbe; but the Jewish future depends on you.

There are huge challenges, some negative like antisemitism and anti-Zionism, but most of them positive: reaching out to other Jewish students and helping make Judaism speak to a new generation, fighting for the people of Darfur, working with

people of other faiths to create a more tolerant society, getting involved in social action projects in Britain, or helping to fight poverty and disease in Third World countries.

Never believe you can't make a difference. You can.

For further reading

My own book on this subject is **To Heal a Fractured World**. See also Warren Goldstein, **Defending the Human Spirit**; Joseph Telushkin, **The Book of Jewish Values**; and Elliot Dorff, **The Way into Tikkun Olam**.