

# **The Invisible String – On Divine Providence and Moral Responsibility**

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A few months ago at the Berkeley Men's Shelter, I had a powerful encounter with a homeless man. After being served dinner by one of our shul volunteers, the man requested to see the priest. As a rabbi who is also a Kohen, I seem to fit the bill, at least on a technical level.

Once I went over to the man, I quickly understood that he did not speak English all that well. In truth, initially, he did not want to speak. He simply wanted to cry in the presence of another person.

Later on, the man explained in broken English that he had been released from prison six months ago after twenty-seven years. He was now in his late sixties. I could see scars on his arms and on his face. Even more so, I could see heavy burdens weighing down on his heart and soul and I could see the weight of those lost years in his teary eyes and in the lines on his face. He asked me one unbearable question over and over again: "What does God want from me now?"

When we parted ways, the man asked me to return and see him again. I did not know how and whether this could even happen given that he himself did not know where he would be from day to day. As I did not want to make a promise I could not keep, I told the man that whatever happens, I will continue to carry him in my heart, and if he can, I hope he will carry this moment with him and remember our connection when the going gets tough.

Not surprisingly, the very next day, the man from the shelter was very much on my mind, weighing heavily on my soul. At some point during the day, as I was walking back home from shul, deep in thought about my experience from the previous night, I bumped into a neighbor, living just a few houses away from my family's home. In need to unburden myself, after some momentary small talk, I briefly shared my experience at the shelter with my neighbor. I explained how hard the man's question hit me: What does a man in his late sixties do after 27 years in prison? How does one salvage their life?

My neighbor was quite astounded by my story. She explained that she was now on her way to meet with Tylor. Tylor or Ty is a homeless man in his late teens. My neighbor met Ty through volunteer work she does, helping homeless people take care of their pets. She took an interest in Ty, partially because of who he is, and partially because of his relatively young age.

My neighbor said, "When I first met Ty, I felt like it was not too late for him. He's still young and we could find a way to help him off the streets before his life is set in any particular way. But over time, I've started to lose hope. This morning, as I was heading to see him, I began to wonder whether I should take a step back and give up...but now, hearing your story about the man in his late sixties, I'm suddenly filled with a new measure of hope, or maybe not hope, but at least with a renewed sense of purpose. Maybe it's not too late for Ty..."

As we were about to part ways, I remembered YEAH, Berkeley's local shelter for at risk youth that our synagogue partners with during the High Holidays for our socks and underwear drive. Earlier that day Maharat Sutton and I had discussed and evaluated our involvement in the drive this year. I mentioned YEAH to my neighbor and said, "You know they're right around the corner and you and Ty don't have to be alone in this."

I walked away feeling strangely uplifted by this unexpected connection. And yet, at the same time, I could not help but feel slightly skeptical about my neighbor's perhaps desperate or unrealistic endeavor.

A couple of days later, I came across an article in the New York Times titled, "Where American Renewal Begins." In it, columnist David Brooks vividly describes a social support program in Baltimore that was founded by a graduate student named Sarah Hemminger.

Brooks writes that "When [Sarah] was in high school one of her classmates, Ryan, failed his freshman year because his home life was crumbling. Six teachers rallied around him, serving as extended family members. Ryan recovered, ended up getting into the U.S. Naval Academy and marrying Sarah."

Years later, while working on her Ph.D. at John Hopkins, she got the principal at a local High School "to give her names of some of the school's most academically underperforming kids and persuaded dozens of Hopkins students to volunteer as extended family members for the kids, driving them to school, bringing them lunch, driving them back to school when they skipped out, doing homework with them, taking them camping."

The organization Sarah Hemminger eventually formed is now called Thread.

Brooks notes that "Thread has taken 415 academically underperforming students in Baltimore schools and built an extended family around them, with about 1,000 volunteers. Each student is given up to five volunteers, who perform the jobs that a family member would perform..."

In short, the organization weaves an elaborate system of relationships, a cohesive village, around the task of helping kids."

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/26/opinion/thread-baltimore-american-renewal-community-program.html>)

As I read about Thread, I felt that the article was somehow a direct response to my own skepticism, only a few days earlier. Sure, my neighbor's efforts to help Ty could not compete with the sort of network provided by something like Thread. But still, by making this critical connection with Ty, my neighbor was weaving the first thread, acting as the first string. Perhaps my neighbor will succeed to connect Ty to YEAH, Berkeley's youth shelter, and by doing so, weave a greater social system of relationships around him.

Sure enough, with all this on my mind, only a few days later I received an email from Dr. Beatrice Balfour, our beloved Gan Shalom preschool director. It was an email offering insights to parents about children's transition into preschool. One of Beatrice's recommendations was

a book called “The Invisible String” by Patrice Karst. The title immediately caught my eye, after all I was already thinking about threads and weaved tapestry creating nets of relationships.

Some of you may be familiar with the book, but for those who are not, permit me to share a quick synopsis and some of my favorite highlights.

In the book, two young twins, Liza and Jeremy, get woken up in the middle of the night by the sound of a thunderstorm. Startled by the noise, they cry to their mom who then seeks to comfort them by telling them about the invisible string:

“Mommy, mommy [...] We want to stay close to you,” said Jeremy, “we’re scared!”

Mom said, “You know we’re always together, no matter what.”

“But how can we be together when you’re out here and we’re in bed?” said Liza.

Mom held something right in front of them and said, “This is how.”

Rubbing their sleepy eyes, the twins came closer to see what Mom was holding. “I was about your age when my Mommy first told me about the INVISIBLE STRING.”

“I don’t see a string,” said Jeremy.

“You don’t need to see the Invisible String. People who love each other are always connected by a very special String made of love.”

“But if you can’t see it, how do you know it’s there?” asked Liza.

“Even though you can’t see it with your eyes, you can feel it with your heart and know that you are always connected to everyone you love.””

The children in the story then carry on by asking many questions about the invisible string:

““Does Jasper the cat have an Invisible String?” Liza asked

“She sure does,” said Mom.

“And best friends like me and Lucy?” asked Liza.

“Best friends too!”

“How far can the String reach?”

“Anywhere and everywhere,” Mom said.

[..] “How about an astronaut out in space?”

“Yes, even there.”

Then Jeremy quietly asked, “Can my String reach all the way to Uncle Brian in Heaven?”

“Yes . . . even there.””

Comforted by their mom, the children finally go back to bed.

The story ends with these precious lines:

““As they slept, they started dreaming of all the Invisible Strings they have, and all the Strings their friends have,

and **their** friends have,

and **their** friends have,

until everyone in the world was connected

by Invisible Strings.

And from deep inside, they now could clearly see . . .

... no one is ever alone.””

Shortly after reading the book, I googled it to learn a bit more about the author. My quick search led me to find an amazing letter that the author recently wrote to children of undocumented immigrants, many of whom were separated from their parents, and who were being held up in detention centers in Texas.

“Dear Children,

My name is Patrice Karst and I wrote this book THE INVISIBLE STRING so that kids all over the world would always know that there is an Invisible String that connects them to their families, even at those times when they cannot be with them (like right now!).

I am so sorry that you are not with them at this very moment, BUT I know in my heart that you will be soon, because all of the good people in the United States and around the world are working hard to get you back to your loved ones as soon as possible.

In the meantime, please know that THE INVISIBLE STRING is real and when you miss your parents and brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, friends, cousins, animals and grandparents that all you need to do is tug on your STRING and they will feel your love and then you can feel them tugging back on the other end of your STRING, deep in your heart.  
[...]

In another search I learnt that the author succeeded to ship her book to all children who were separated from their parents and that the book was in fact distributed to every child held in these detention centers.

Patrice Karst’s note suddenly illuminated the journey I’ve been on for the past week.

A homeless man in his late sixties, who had recently been released from prison after 27 years, and whose situation seemed hopeless, had led me – through an invisible string – to my neighbor who herself was struggling with a seemingly hopeless situation of a homeless young man. Our conversation led me to connect this young man – through an invisible string – to YEAH, Berkeley’s youth shelter. YEAH’s work is tied – through an invisible string – to the type of work that THREAD does in Baltimore through the social connections it weaves for its participants. On a deeper level, these invisible strings extend all the way to our borders. Indeed, if we stretch our moral imagination, we can see that these strings extend even further than that.

Chabad’s last Rebbe, R. Menachem Schneerson zt”l, offered powerful reflections in talks after the August 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Rebbe taught:

“We have seen in our time how the energy concealed within the minutest subatomic particles can destroy an entire city and millions of inhabitants. This is possible because within every tiny bit of matter, God has infused a tremendous amount of power. If this is true with negative activities such as warfare, it is true regarding a person’s spiritual potential as well. Through the proper use of the power locked within a person’s divine soul, an individual can have an immeasurable effect on himself and on the entire world.

Where we once believed the world to be made up of a multitude of different elements, through examining substances at the sub-atomic level we find that they are all built of the same matter. This demonstrates the tremendous unity of creation.” (Polter, *Listening to Life’s Messages, Brooklyn, NY: Sichos in English, 2004*, attributes this teaching to a letter of the Rebbe cited in *Igrot Kodesh, 13:311.*)

As I was working on this sermon earlier in the summer, I shared some of my thoughts with Frayda, my incredible life partner. In response, Frayda offered a powerful insight. She pointed out that in the children’s book, in a moment of crisis, the children turn to their parent and say:

“Mommy, mommy [...] We want to stay close to you,” [...] “we’re scared!”

Frayda explained, “Perhaps in a similar way, during the High Holidays, we too turn to God and say, ‘*Avinu, Malkeinu* – Our Father, our King’ we want to stay close to You. We’re scared.”

Like the children in the book, it is easy for us to become overwhelmed by the sounds and noise that fill our world. In such a state of disarray, it becomes critical for us to focus on what is of real, true, and of lasting value. We must not only see the world with our eyes or view it through headlines. Instead, we must learn to perceive it with our hearts and with our moral compasses as well. It is high time for us to remember the invisible strings that hold our shared existence with each other, that bind us together, and that obligate us spiritually and morally to one another.

In one of his last interviews, R. Abraham Joshua Heschel bequeathed this message to a younger generation:

“I would say to young people a number of things. [...] I would say, let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can, everyone, do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all the frustrations and all disappointments. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to build a life as if it were a work of art. You’re not a machine. And you are young. Start working on this great work of art called your own existence.” (R. Abraham J. Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 412)

Now I know what you’re thinking...I’m sure you’re wondering what happened next. Who might I have bumped into or what else might I have discovered in the course of writing this sermon. What other connection was made or what other invisible string was threaded through my initial chance encounter with that homeless man at Berkeley’s shelter?

Well, in truth, this is what happens next...We are what happens next...

In the children’s book, the kids fall asleep, dreaming of all of their invisible strings. In our case, the urgency of this hour calls upon us to wake up. Indeed, we must seize the opportunity to wake up and become aware of all of our invisible strings and the moral urgency that tugs at our very own hearts.

As we awake I pray that we become aware and act upon all the Invisible Strings we have, and all the Strings our friends have,  
and **their** friends have,  
and **their** friends have,  
until everyone in the world becomes connected  
by Invisible Strings.  
Until, from deep inside, we can clearly see...no one is ever alone.