

Anthony is a 5 foot 6 Hispanic male in his late 40s. Tattoos run up his arms to his neck, ending at the base of his buzz-cut head. The tattoos are generous in number, each imprint representing a time in this middle-aged man's life. He wears an oversized plain white t-shirt and baggy black jean shorts that reach down to the lower parts of his calves. He is missing a number of his teeth—most of the remaining teeth in his mouth are encapsulated by gold and silver fillings. Looking at his mouth and teeth you might try to imagine the circumstances of Anthony's life, as if each tooth or hole in his mouth had a profound story to tell. He had spent time in prison and was currently out on parole. How long was his sentence? For what crime was he incarcerated? That information I do not know. Rumor has it that while in prison he unwillingly became involved with a gang and as a parolee he often changed his phone number and moved addresses to avoid a messy past that would haunt him for the rest of his life. At a first glance, Anthony doesn't appear to be the type of person you would want to be caught with alone in an alley. Nor is he a person who, at first glance, you would want to be assigned to you as a roommate.

A few days after my dad's passing this July, I began the painful task of going through his cell phone contacts and messages to start to piece together the story of the past four years. Perhaps the most private person I have ever known, my dad spent the last four years of his life driving a cab and lived in a group home setting in Anaheim. After the loss of his business, the foreclosure of our family home, and a divorce from his wife of 34 years this educated white Conservative man from Seattle began a new chapter of his life—one that I was, for the most part, unfamiliar with. Of course, I met my dad for lunches, had him over on weekends, and celebrated holidays with him. But he deliberately shielded me from his failing health and the reality of the impoverished life he and thousands of other individuals were living right here in Orange County. He never informed me of his address nor did he allow my family to visit him at home.

Sitting at my kitchen table the day after the funeral I dialed into my dad's Verizon mailbox account and listened: You have four new messages:

Message One, June 24, 2011: I hear a male voice with a strong Chicano vibe:

"Hi Sparky...it's your roommate. How ya feeling? I'm praying for you man. Call me back"

Message Two, June 29, 2011:

"Sparky....it's Anthony...I'm praying for you....I'm going to see you back driving your cab really soon, don't you worry. I love you man"

Message Three, July 13, 2011

My friend, I'm worried. Where are you? I'm praying for you

Message Four, the final message, July 14, 2011

Sparky, it's Anthony. Where did they take you? Where are you? You're going to be ok. Call me back.

I hung up the cell phone, confused. Who's Anthony? I then called the mystery man back and learned that a couple of months ago he had been my dad's roommate. Before entering the hospital my dad had entrusted Anthony with all of his belongings—his paperwork, clothing, and memorabilia. For such a private person I was perplexed by this trust. Anthony and I talked briefly and set up a time to meet the next day so I could retrieve the dozen or so boxes he was storing at a relative's house.

The next morning my brother-in-law, Dave, and I drove to Anthony's new apartment and was greeted by a man who, quite frankly, looked like a gangster. I was initially confused. There must be some mistake. Why would my dad trust this man, a seemingly stranger, to take care of his belongings? As my encounter with Anthony progressed, my confusion soon gave way to awe as Anthony began to illustrate the most powerful story of friendship and kindness I have ever encountered.

Little did I know that this brief interaction and painful event would mark one of the most profound moments of my life.

When my dad moved into his last residence—a two bedroom home shared by four men, he was introduced to his new roommate, Anthony. The two immediately welcomed each other into their lives and became good friends, despite their diverse backgrounds. They watched TV together, talked about their lives for hours, and respected each other for what was inside and what each of them had to offer to the world.

As Anthony continued recalling his relationship with my dad, he began to emerge in my eyes as a *tzadik*, a righteous man, a man of God. Aware of my dad's bad knees and vulnerable physical state, he became my dad's protector and caregiver. He cooked authentic Mexican meals, which he happily shared. He recalls asking my dad on one occasion, "Sparky, guess how much this entire meal cost me to make?" Of course my dad would think about his latest bill from Ruby's or the Crab Cooker and would guess \$20. Anthony proudly shared "This meal only cost \$3! Look how far a few bucks can go." A brilliant artist, Anthony drew portraits of his new friend. And after finding out about my dad's love for dancing, he began to take him out to all the Hispanic nightclubs where they would dance the night away. "I showed him a new world," Anthony said, "one where it doesn't matter how much we have or don't have. In this world all that matters is enjoying life, being with people, and giving everyone respect."

A few months into my dad and Anthony's friendship, a new tenant joined the house—this one was a Hell's Angel on parole for assault. A large, tough biker, Anthony sensed my dad's fear—that something was wrong. He saw fear in my dad's eyes as he was leaving the house one day and decided to hide outside the bedroom window where he could spy on the interaction between Hell's Angel and my dad. Anthony wasn't going to let this guy get away with anything. Much to his suspicion, he overheard the Hell's Angel tenant—or as I like to call him—the Angel from Hell, threatening my dad—that if my dad

didn't pay him his wages from last night's cab fares he would beat him. Anthony immediately called 911 and saw to it that this harmful person was evicted from the property. Anthony was a protector, a guardian angel who would not let harm come my dad's way.

In April my dad's health severely declined—he began falling, he didn't feel well, and he couldn't sleep. Anthony cooked for him. Picked him up if he fell. Helped him get around. He recalls staying up all night with him when he couldn't sleep. "This is what decent people do, everyone deserves kindness" Anthony assured me.

Kindness. In Hebrew, we call this Chesed. As we find ourselves immersed in the High Holidays we are reminded of this value. The core of the selichot prayers, which we recited last Saturday evening, is the 13 Attributes of Mercy, the very words that God taught Moses for the people to use whenever they needed to beg for divine compassion. One of these thirteen attributes is kindness.

Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v'Chanun, eyrech ahpayim, v'rav chesed, v'e,et, notzr chesed lalalfim

Adonai! Adonai! God, Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to anger and Abundant in Kindness and Truth, Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations (Deut 34:6-7)

If we are created B'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God, it is our duty to emulate God's kindness in our daily lives. On Rosh Hashanah we must recall our actions of the year and ask ourselves "am I living a life of God?" Have I engaged in acts of kindness, in gemilut hasadim?

Our tradition deeply examines the distinction between charity, and acts of loving kindness.

In tractate Succa 49b of the Talmud Our Rabbis taught: *Gemilut Chesed is greater than charity in three ways. Charity is done with one's money, while loving-kindness may be done with one's money or with one's person. Charity is given only to the poor, while loving-kindness may be given both to the poor and to the rich. Charity is given only to the living, while loving-kindness may be shown to both the living and the dead.*

It is the way that we treat ALL human beings that matters most in life. Whether that other person is more or less fortunate than you—whether you share a culture or are divided by language—it is God's holy act of chesed, of kindness, that bonds humanity together. How can we expect our God to treat us with compassion if we do not treat God's creation with chesed?

There are countless stories of chesed that inspire our lives. We have heard stories of great courage and kindness—the many European families who risked their lives to conceal Jews from the Nazis. Who can forget hearing about the heroic man, Abe Zelmanowitz who died at the World Trade Center One on 9/11 after choosing to stay in the building with his quadriplegic friend? Chesed also comes in small packages that impact our world, even if in the tiniest way. Lending a listening ear, showing up to a shiva minyan, cooking a meal for a sick friend, or paying for the coffee of the stranger behind you in the drive through at Starbucks.

What acts of chesed have you witnessed this year? How can you emulate those acts?

This Rosh Hashanah each of us reflect on the past year and pray to be inscribed in the Book of Life for the year 5772. As we move forward through each day may each of us remember the words of our Sages: *When a person departs from this world, neither his silver, nor gold, nor precious stones nor pearls accompany him; only his Torah and good deeds.*

Perhaps Anthony will never know a life of gold or silver or even the feeling of being free from a difficult past. He may never have job security or stable health. He may always live under the poverty line. But I do know that Anthony embodies kindness. His small acts of chesed made a difference in my family's life; his acts transcend beyond worldly things, they transcend flesh and blood. In the World to Come, God-willing, Anthony will be rich with grace and compassion.

God is the ultimate judge; our destiny is in God's hands.. It is not by appearance or lifestyle that God sees us. Not by our tattoos, or our piercings, our haircut or our mannerisms. It is not by our modest dress or by our skin. Not by our educational background, or by our race.

It is by chesed that God serves as the Almighty Judge over our lives. On Rosh Hashanah it is written and Yom Kippur it is sealed.

God, my Rock and Redeemer, may you have compassion upon us, your worldly creations—the beings into which you breathed ruach and carefully placed a neshamah. This year, our God, may we each live up to your compassion by treating others justly. May we each strive to count our days by acts of chesed.

Ken Yihi Ratzon.