



Parshat Re'eh
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What's cooking?
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In our American milieu, we pride ourselves on individualism. We believe in the power of the American dream—the ability of every person to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, to make of themselves something great. Because we believe so much in the power of every individual, we tell stories of success as if each person were fighting against the current of the world, we talk about how they did this and thought that. Rarely do we remember to include in their stories the people that helped them along the way.

It's true that each one of us has the potential to live our American dream. But that dream doesn't just come because we've got talent or because we work hard. More often than not, our dreams come true because there are people in our lives who care about us and support us, and who help us to open the doors to our future.

Let me tell you a story. Dona Suzana grew up in Bahia Brazil. As a child, she was constantly tormented by her peers. They would tease her for her stutter, for her inability to string words together, and they mocked her attempts to speak up for herself. She was constantly getting into fights, using her fists to say what her mouth could not. The only place she found peace, was in the kitchen, cooking with her mother. As a girl, she dreamed about building her life there in the peace of a simmering sauce or a hearty stew.

But that dream wasn't easy to realize. Dona Suzana met her husband when they were both young and poor. After she got pregnant, she moved in with him. His apartment was barely furnished. He had one twin bed and one record player. To make ends meet, he became a

fisherman and Dona Suzana started working as a laundry lady while she raised their two sons. She spent her days elbow deep in soapy water, cleaning and hanging up other people's clothing, dreaming always of what her life could be if only she could make a living in the kitchen.

Then, something magical happened. The mayor came to Bahia with 50 construction workers and started asking around for someone to cook for his crew as while they worked on a renovation project. Everyone recommended Dona Suzana. She was over the moon. As she shared on the Netflix series *Street Food Latin America*, “my biggest dream was to become a cook, so this was my chance to prove myself. But...I didn't have any equipment. So I worked up the courage, I took out a loan and I bought everything—pans, plates, flatware, all of the ingredients—rice, beans, beef, chicken, all of it...[It] made me really happy. I was serving them breakfast in the morning and lunch at noon, I made different dishes every day. They liked everything.”

When the construction project ended, Dona Suzana happily went to collect her money. This was her big break. She was going to use the funds to pay back her loans and then maybe to start cooking as she had always dreamed. But the mayor never paid. For those weeks she spent cooking, she lost not only her wages as a laundry woman, but she also incurred significant debt and had no way to pay it back. She was devastated. As she shared on the show, “I was very sad and I cried a lot. This was my chance to have a new life and it turned out to be the biggest disappointment I've ever been through...after being cheated like this, I never wanted to hear about cooking again.”

Dona Suzana went back to doing laundry. Her mother got sick and died. She mourned her mother, and she mourned her dreams which could never be realized.

Years later, a group of graffiti artists known as the Musas boys came to Bahia. They were looking for someone to cook for them onsite, and asked people who was the best cook around. Again, everyone said Dona Suzana. But Dona Suzana wasn't about to be swindled again. The Musas boys asked her to cook for them, but she said no. Her kitchen was closed. They begged her, please everyone says your food is the best, please cook for us. She said no. They said, we heard what happened to you last time, we'll pay in advance. She reluctantly agreed.

That first day, she made the Musas boys a meal they will never forget. They started taking pictures of her food and posting it to social media, talking up her skill and her story. Soon more people were coming to her door, asking her to feed them. She set up tables outside, but still refused to say that she was a cook or that she had a restaurant. So the Musas boys decided to step in once again. They thought about Dona Suzana, about the way that her life had been shaped by the people around her. As a child, the cruelty of other children drove her into the kitchen to build the skills that would make her an illustrious chef. As an adult, the respect and admiration of her neighbors opened the doors of opportunities that would shape her life. Using their skill as graffiti artists, the Musas boys made Dona Suzana a sign for her restaurant—it reads “re restaurant”—a tribute to the trials and tribulations that ultimately led Dona Suzana to success.

Today, people visit Dona Suzana from all over the world. Major newspapers, Netflix, tourists, and of course locals from all over Brazil. The Musas boys still organize her Facebook page for her, and happily post pictures of her with guests and with her delicious foods. People love her joy and the love with which she serves each dish. And I think, on some level, people are also drawn to her story.

Dona Suzana didn't just succeed because she had a dream and worked hard. She succeeded because the people around her believed in her, sometimes more than she even

believed in herself. And that's why Dona Suzana's story is such an important story for each one of us.

We're heading now into the month of Elul. The month when we reflect on how we can do better. How we can do teshuva, the work of repair. We focus on ourselves. On our individual needs. On our personal relationships. On our lives. And that's important. But it's not the whole story.

This world is not just about us. We are one star in the galaxy, one grain of sand at the shore of the sea. If we focus on ourselves alone, we fail to see how our lives fit into the picture of the world, we fail to make a real difference. But when we can focus not only on ourselves, but also on helping others—that's when we become empowered. That is when we begin living our best lives.

That's why the Talmud teaches גדול המעשה יותר מן העושה—one who causes others to do is greater than one who does. One who inspires others is greater than one who is just inspired. One who helps another to find success is greater than someone who is just successful. One who lives to empower others is greater than any empowered individual.

Our lives are not about just us, they are about all of us. And so, as we enter this Elul season, I have a challenge for you. Who can you help? Who can you empower? Who will be better off this year because of you?