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AACC—The Code for a Life Well Lived
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In the deep south, in one of the reddest cities in one of the reddest states in our beloved land, there is a statue in the town square honoring a man who is both an immigrant and a Jew. Max Heller fled from Austria after it was annexed by Nazi Germany, settled in Greenville, South Carolina, and then became so beloved in his adopted home that he literally became the Mayor of Greenville. There is a statue of him in the city center to this day. But Max Heller's story is not only about Max Heller. It is about *all* of us. And here is why.

Max Heller's story reveals the code to a life well lived. Here is a mnemonic for that code. AACC. Each of these letters, AACC, is going to point to an important question about *your* life.

The first question is simply this: Has someone ever been an angel of mercy to you, and have you ever been an angel of mercy to somebody else? The first A is for angel.

It is 1937 in Vienna, Austria, one year before the Nazis invade. Max Heller is 18 years old. One night he goes to an outdoor café in Vienna, where he meets five young women from Greenville, South Carolina. He asks one of those young women, whose name is Mary Mills, to dance. They dance, and afterwards they exchange names and addresses. This is before smart phones. He does not enter her name in his phone. He holds onto a scrap of paper that has her name on it. And a good thing, too.

One year later, in 1938, the Nazis invade and annex Austria. In a video made years later, when he was an adult looking back at that dreadful day, Max Heller relates what it was like to

live through this nightmare. He remembers as he walked home seeing swastikas *everywhere*; crowds shouting anti-Semitic slogans; shuls literally on fire, Torah scrolls literally burning; Jews being beaten in the streets. He and his family feared for their very lives.

Max says to his father: we have to move to America. His father says: we do not know anybody *in* America. Max says: I do. I met a girl, I'll write to her. His father says: that girl will not remember you. Max searches his pockets, where is that scrap, where is that scrap, and he finds it. He resolves to write her a letter.

Only one problem. Max does not know English. He buys a German-English dictionary, and starts writing. This letter is now housed at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City. In the letter he reminds Mary Mills of their dance a year ago, and then he writes, and I quote: "Now I have a great beg to you! I please you from heart if you can write me, that you will help me."

Several weeks later, Mary Mills responds with a registered letter. She remembers him, she has lined up help for him, there is a Jew in Greenville named Shepherd Saltzman, he has a shirt factory, and he will hire you. Thus sponsored, Max Heller was able to immigrate to America and start working at the Piedmont Shirt Company, and he was soon able to bring his parents and siblings to Greenville.

In what was a cruel and cold world, a random angel randomly appeared, Mary Mills the young Christian woman who cared. This Mary Mills moment is remarkable. She had met him *once*. For a few minutes. She could have ignored his letter. She could have said, who am I to him, who is he to me, that I need to go out of my way. She could have said my plate is full. But she went out of her way for a stranger on the other end of the world, and saved his and his family's life. Small wonder that Max called her "his angel."

What do we do when Mary Mills moments present themselves to us? Because they do. Do we see them when they are before us? Or do we choose *not* to see? When a Mary Mills moment lands on our life, do we say my plate is full? Or do we say: time for me to be somebody else's angel? *What Mary Mills moment is now awaiting your response?* When our life is lived, and our life story told, a big part of our story will be, when a Mary Mills moment happened to us, did we emulate Mary Mills?

Here is the second question that comes from Max Heller's life. We all experience adversity. Adversity is part of the human condition. No one can avoid it. What is the effect of adversity upon us? What qualities does adversity bring out in us? The second A is for adversity.

When Max Heller arrived in Greenville, he had \$1.60 in his pocket. He worked at the Piedmont Shirt Company 70 to 80 hours a week sweeping floors, earning \$10 a week. He rose up the chain to become a vice president. Ten years later, with the blessing of his caring boss and mentor, Shepard Saltzman, he opened up his own shirt company. He started with sixteen employees. The company grew to 700 employees. His company was prospering, and he was prospering, but as he put it, "I was never interested in being the richest man in the cemetery." He sold his company and by the age of forty-nine pivoted to his next chapter which would be devoted to public service.

Max Heller's experience as a Jew in Hitler's Europe could have filled him with bitterness and self-pity. Instead it filled him with resolve, resourcefulness and resilience.

What about us? Think about some piece of adversity that befell us this past year. Did it make us resentful or resilient? Did it make us smaller or bigger? Did it make us angry or determined to transcend?

Which leads to our third question. **It was very important to Max Heller that his life not only be about Max Heller. That he serve a larger purpose, that he do something noble that went way beyond his own life. Do we do that? The next letter in our pneumonic is C, for circle of concern. Who is in the circle of concern in your life?**

After selling his business, Max Heller was elected mayor of Greenville, to serve the people who had opened their hearts for him, a position he held for eight years.

In 1971, when he became Mayor, Greenville city government was still segregated. He desegregated city government.

The poorest in Greenville lived in deplorable housing. He increased the quantity and quality of affordable housing.

Downtown Greenville was dead. He revitalized it.

Max Heller's circle of concern was a whole city. A whole city was better off because of him. As a friend of mine put it, Greenville saved Max, and then Max saved Greenville.

What is *our* circle of concern? **Who is better off because we are here?**

Which leads to our fourth question. **What is our essential character, and do we bring that essential character with us wherever we go? The fourth letter is C for character.**

It is not uncommon for somebody who has a big impact on the outside world to have complicated relationships with their own family. All too often the impact on the outside world comes at the expense of family. But Max Heller was the same person outside as he was inside: honest, ethical, decent. He was a loving husband to his wife Trude for 69 years. When they erected the statue of him in Greenville, people made speeches saying he was a hero. I'm not a hero, he said. But I don't mind if you tell my wife that I'm a hero. I'd like her to think I'm a

hero. Sixty plus years after he first proposed, he was still trying to win his wife's heart anew every day. That is character.

Max Heller brought his fine character into the board room, the bed room, and city hall, which is why he thrived in all spaces.

What about us? Are we the same in all spaces? What is your character, is it working for you and the people in your life? What changes, if any, do we need to make to our character?

The Max Heller story reveals the code to a life well lived. AACC. Angel. Adversity. Circle of concern. Character.

If you get these four questions right, you will live a beautiful life. If you are an angel to somebody else; if you respond to adversity by becoming stronger and kinder; if you reach many people in your circle of concern; if you have character that is decent and kind and you are the same in all spaces; if all that is true, you will lead a worthy life. And when your days are lived out, people will say of you something like what they said of Max Heller when he passed away at the age of 92. Ordinary citizens in Greenville said things like, and I quote: "He made Greenville better, and he made us want to be better as individuals and better as a people. To be with Max was to understand decency and goodness. To be with Max and Trude, that was love. They were the embodiment of marriage as it should be lived."

If you are on track to that kind of life, and that kind of legacy, keep on going. Don't stop.

But if you are *not* on track to that kind of life, and that kind of legacy, that is why God has given us Rosh Hashanah, and why, please God, we will have another year to get it right.

If we could have been an angel to somebody else but haven't been, it is not too late.

If adversity has made us smaller, it is not too late for adversity to summon our larger self.

If our circle of concern is too narrow, it is not too late. This year let one person be better off because you are here.

If our character needs repair, it is not too late. We can have the kind of character that makes our loved ones proud.

Which brings us back to Max Heller and Mary Mills. We know what their encounter meant to Max Heller. It saved his life. It made possible his marriage to Trude, his 3 children, his 10 grandchildren, his 18 great grandchildren. His grandson Danny is with us today. All of that life was made possible because when he said “Now I have a great beg to you!,” Mary Mills said yes, not no. But what did it mean to Mary Mills?

I have a friend who has a friend who knows Mary Mills and her children. And this friend of a friend connected us, as a result of which I have in dialogue with Mary Mills’ daughter, Mary Moore Roberson, who lives today in Columbia, South Carolina, is 79 years old, and is a retired Episcopal priest. Mary Moore Roberson sent me this note, which feels like parchment in my hands, sacred writ imbued with history and moral meaning. The daughter of Mary Mills writes:

When we were little children, we often sat on the grass in our backyard at our parents’ feet as they enjoyed a drink at twilight. Over and over again, we would say, “Mother tell us about you and Max,” and she did—so often that the details came to be engraved deep without our very selves.

Max and Mother... deserve to live on in our hearts and minds, our decisions and actions.

Max Heller and Mary Mills met in 1937, she saved him in 1938, and her 79-year old daughter is still inspired by it in 2018.

What will *you* do in this new year that will still inspire your loved ones 80 years from now?

What will *you* do in this new year that will echo for eternity? *Shanah tovah.*