



Uplyfting

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Delivered on Shabbat, July 20, 2019 (17 Tamuz 5779)

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On Thursday morning, I needed to visit Harvard. I generally avoid going there because of one thing: Harvard Square Parking. If any of you have ever given it a try yourself, you know that Harvard Square Parking is like that old video game Tetris - just trying to find the right space to fit the car is a challenge. Knowing that, I planned plenty of time to get there. Right as I was leaving, though, I got a phone call. As the call was wrapping up, I looked and saw it was 9:05. I had to be at the Law School campus at 9:30. No problem – I took out my Lyft app. Hallelujah, there were 6 Lyfts nearby.

But Lyft’s definition of “nearby” and mine were not even remotely the same. Although the “nearby” drivers, little icons happily circling nearby like little ants on my screen, looked so close to Temple Emanuel, the nearest was more than seven minutes away. I quickly did the math. If I waited 7 minutes, no way would I make it on time. There was another option, though – one that under ordinary circumstances I would never have taken. Right there on my app there was the option of a Lyft LUX – a shiny beacon of cushier-than-necessary hope, and it was only three minutes away. Sold!

There’s an expression that coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous. As I got into that luxurious car on that Thursday morning, I thought, this is definitely more than I need, but then the driver turned around and said, “This is great! I’ve never picked anyone up at the shul before.”

We kibitzed for a bit. He shared that he lived locally and was a member of another nearby shul. “Another shul?!” I teased. “Don’t worry,” he replied, “I have friends at Temple Emanuel.” Wanting to know more about him, I asked how he came to be a Lyft driver.

He said he had recently sold his family business. After a few days of vacationing, a few days of puttering, and a few days of putting together resumes and waiting on replies, he decided that wasn’t for him.

He didn't want to, as he said, "sit around watching CNN," while he was looking for his next chapter. First of all, he said, the news these days is depressing. Secondly, sitting and consuming the news is depressing. Yes, he was waiting. But he could passively wait. Or he could actively fill his days in a gainful way while he waited.

He needed to get out and do something. In a gig economy, a gig was just what he was looking for. Which led him to Lyft.

His approach inspired me, so I asked a follow-up question: "Do you *like* being a lyft driver?"

A big, authentic smile came across his face. "Yes," he said, "I really do. It's a job I do on my own terms, when I want, where I want, how I want, for as long or as little as I want. But more than that," he added, "I love the conversations."

He went on to share that there's something magical that happens when you are in a car. If any of you have driven teenagers anywhere, you know that when you are not looking directly at one another, people confide in you. People share their lives and their thoughts and their stories with you. He joked, "I finally get what hairdressers have been saying all these years." In twenty-minute increments, while they are in his seat, he gets a glimpse into the wondrous variety of human experience.

There was the MIT Ph.D. student from Southeast Asia who had just found out his wife was expecting – a girl. So happy to become a father, so conflicted that it was not the first-born son he had hoped for. Did our friend the driver have any advice for him on how to guarantee having a boy next time?

There was the executive coming home from a night out having had much too much to drink – buoyant and boisterous, talkative and troubled.

There was the mistress, picked up at an opulent downtown Boston address, who did not say a word the whole ride home.

Every new pickup, a window into another life. Every new pickup, a reminder that every person, no matter who they are, what they have, wherever they are coming from or going to, has struggles and blessings.

We are all so much more than we seem.

I have been in a lot of Lyfts and heard a lot of stories. But this driver struck my soul, because his is not just another story, it's a template for transforming our world.

What does he do? He listens. Deeply. No agenda. No baggage. He just listens. He gets that everybody has a story. And everybody's story has its own intrinsic meaning.

What does he do? He engages. He gets that each person needs to be heard, even if only for a few minutes. In this cold world where so much of our days, where so much of every encounter is transactional, where even the experience of riding in a car has become transactional, he offers a smile and a willing ear.

What does he do? He learns. From each person, no matter if the pickup was in a rich neighborhood or a poor one, whether someone much older or much younger, he gets that each person he encounters has a story with its own teaching that he can take back to inform his own journey.

Martin Buber called this the difference between "I-It" and "I-Thou." In a world where real connection is rare, in the confines of his car, he creates connection. In a world too often harsh and hurtful, in the confines of his car, he creates calm. In a world too often divisive and destructive, in the confines of his car, he chooses to create a place to see and be seen.

I was struck by his frame for why he does this – his "I don't want to be sitting around watching the news." The news today too often immerses us in a non-stop loop of bitterness and brokenness, politics and polarization, that makes us feel powerless. In the confines of his car, though, he can make a different choice. In his car, he can create an oasis of civility and decency.

We may not drive a Lyft, but we all have the power to do that in our own sphere. Whether at home or in the office or just out and about, we are not powerless, we are

powerful. We are powerful because we can choose how we create the space around us. We get to choose how we encounter others. Do we rush past? Or do we stop to listen? Do we just hear, or do we listen and learn?

The news this week is replete with stories of Justice John Paul Stevens, who passed away on Tuesday. Whether from the left or from the right, transcending partisan politics, obituaries this week have spoken of Justice Stevens as a man who embodied the going-out-of-style values of humility and civility.

The Washington Post called him “unfailingly polite and gracious to colleagues, clerks, and advocates.”

Fox news lauded him as a “humble person who despite his position and stature, was at ease with all kinds of people, and able to bring them together.

How do you inspire that from both sides of the political spectrum? The shared theme is not based on his rulings or his politics, but on how he listened. How he listened to hear another perspective with genuine interest, and with the possibility he might be persuaded. How he listened with respect to the clerks who worked with him. How he brought gentle human touch to the lawyers who brought cases before him, seeing them as people first, even going so far as to once tell a nervous advocate who was mortified to have mistakenly called him Judge instead of Justice that no lesser source than the Constitution does the same.

Among the many stories told this week, perhaps the most powerful shows his capacity to listen not just to what was said, but to what was unsaid. Former law clerk Christopher Eisgruber, who is now President of Princeton University, told this story: “Before Justice Stevens arrived, an older male justice had instructed one of the few female clerks present to serve coffee. When Justice Stevens entered, he quickly grasped the situation, walked up to the young woman and said: ‘Thank you for taking your turn with the coffee. I think it’s my turn now.’ He took over the job.”

We do not serve on the Supreme Court, but every single one of us has that power to craft, in our own spheres, a space to hear and to help another human heart. We may not drive a Lyft, but each of us can uplift.

Wherever we are, we can carve out a holy space.

The name of our shul is Temple Emanuel. Emanuel means “God is with us.” How is God with us? The rabbis share an interpretation. They say that when the first communal sacred Jewish space, the *mishkan*, was built, at its core was an ark. On that ark were two angels facing each other. In God’s sacred space, they explained, the angels on the ark are the keys to finding God’s presence. They say that the angels show us God is found wherever, and whenever, we face each other with our whole selves. **God is with us when we are with each other.**

In a world without enough God in it, it is up to us to bring God in.

In a world too often filled with despair and discord, it is up to us to create an oasis of decency.

In a world of isolation, it is up to us to “uplyft” each other.

Shabbat Shalom.