



Rosh Hashanah, Day Two
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Infinite Good

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December 30, 1983 was a freezing cold day in New York City. On that day a New York firefighter named Eugene Pugliese was fixing a broken pipe in SoHo. Just then a man comes running up the street shouting that there was a fire. Pugliese follows him, running towards the fire as fast as he possibly can. The firefighter can see that an apartment building is on fire. Smoke is billowing out from the sixth floor. He runs inside the building. Is anyone here? Is anyone here? He can see that an artist's studio is engulfed in flames. Pugliese sees a woman crying hysterically. My baby! My baby! My baby is in the fire.

Pugliese does not have time to think. Instinctively, immediately, he escorts the mother out of the fire. He then heads back into the fire on his hands and knees. He is crawling through the burning studio and blinding smoke. He could not see anything for the thick presence of the smoke. He is groping in the darkness on the floor to see if he can find the baby. At last, he finds her. He gets her out of the smoke-filled room as quickly as possible; she is not breathing; she is unconscious. He does immediate mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He holds her and rushes down six flights of stairs to get her to an ambulance. In the ambulance, she wakes up and starts to cry.

Her name was Deirdre Taylor. She was four years old. The story of his rescue of her was on the front page of the New York Daily News. That front page news story hangs on his wall ever since. Saving Deirdre Taylor was the most important thing he ever did in his career as a firefighter. But he never saw her, never heard from her, or from her family--until many years later.

For her part Deirdre Taylor grows up knowing that as a four year old, she was trapped in

a burning building, she was unconscious, she had stopped breathing, and her life was saved by a courageous New York firefighter named Gene Pugliese. She knows the story of her rescue was the front-page news of the New York Daily News. She has the article tucked away in a keepsake binder.

She grows up. She gets married. She has children. She becomes an emergency room nurse. The more she does her work as an emergency room nurse, the more she thinks about the firefighter who had saved her life. She realized how few people ever thank her for being with them on the worst day of their lives. On the worst day of her life, a courageous man had been with her, but she had never been able to thank him. She had not lived in New York since the fire. She did not know where to start to find him. Perhaps the firefighter who had saved her had on 9/11 run into the Twin Towers. Who knows if he is even still alive? From time to time she would Google his name but find nothing.

The firefighter would think about the little girl he had saved in the fire. Whatever happened to her? She would think about the firefighter who had saved her. Whatever happened to him?

How do we evaluate the consequences of what we do? There is a famous Mishnah, Peah 1:1, that teaches us that the good that flows from what we do can literally be infinite because of ripple effects. We cause good to go out into the world, which ripples into more good, which ripples into still more good. In the words of the Mishnah, *ein lahem shiur*, there is no quantifiable way to measure the impact of the good that we can do. When a healer heals, that's not just healing that one person, in that one moment. Who knows what that patient who has a new lease on life can do with that new lease on life? That's infinite good. When a teacher inspires a student to a love of learning, and that student goes on to write a poem or a symphony,

or to make a discovery, that's infinite good. When a friend of yours is down and out, they've lost hope, and you are there for them, and you listen to them, and you are with them, and they know they are not alone because they have you, that is infinite good. When you visit somebody who doesn't have any visitors, that is infinite good. When you call somebody just to say I'm checking in on you, that is infinite good. Who knows what the person you just helped is going to do for somebody else because you just helped them?

Which brings us back to the baby and the firefighter who had saved her, and what happened 36 years later.

It is March, 2020. New York City is in the grip of the pandemic. Its hospitals are overwhelmed. Its emergency rooms need help. Following the news in her home in Alexandria, Virginia, Deirdre Taylor asks permission from her family to leave home and go to New York City and help out in emergency rooms. Her family says: go. She packs one thing that has a deep emotional resonance: the front page story from the New York Daily News that shows her rescue. She is determined to find the firefighter, if he is still alive, and thank him for saving her life.

When she gets to the emergency room, it is overwhelming. She works around the clock intubating the sickest patients. For two weeks, she did not have even one moment off. Finally, she gets a brief break. She goes with the article in hand to the firehouse where Pugliese had worked, but there is a sign on the door discouraging any visitors because of Covid-19. Maybe it's not meant to be.

One day, though, she finally gets a break. A group of firefighters from New York came to the hospital to deliver pizzas to say thank you. Deirdre Taylor goes to greet the firefighters and says: can I ask you a question? She tells them the story of how she was saved, how she had

always wanted to thank the firefighter who had saved her life, but had never been able to find him. She went to the firehouse last week but could not get in. Could you help me find this firefighter?

Sure. What's his name?

His name is Eugene Pugliese.

Oh, Gene? He stops by the firehouse all the time. I have his number in my cell.

Deirdre Taylor asked him to give Pugliese her phone number. Less than an hour later, Taylor's cell phone rings. She picks up.

It's Gene Pugliese. I'm the firefighter who rescued you that day 36 years ago.

Oh my God. I don't even have the words. Oh my God. How can I ever thank you for saving my life? I have been dreaming of this day, dreaming of the time when I could thank you, for so long. Thank you, thank you, thank you for saving my life.

It was truly my greatest blessing. Can I ask you a question?

Sure. Ask anything you want.

It's a small detail, I don't know why I remember it so clearly, but I remember that when I picked you up in the fire, your hair was blond. Is your hair still blond?

It is, she said. I would love to see you in person, and thank you in person, and you could see I still have the blond hair I had as a baby, but I intubate Covid-19 patients all day, every day, and I don't want to take the risk of getting you sick.

No worries, he said. One day, one fine day, we will meet in person.

Do you like the Yankees? Love the Yankees. Me too. One day we'll go to a Yankees game together.

Taylor told Pugliese: whatever good I do, whoever I am able to help, comes from you. If you had not saved me that day, I would not now be a nurse helping New York City in the pandemic. If I am helpful to even one patient, it is you who saved that patient, because it is you who saved me.

No it is I who should thank you, Pugliese responded. Your work is so meaningful to me because a dear friend of mine from the fire department just passed away from Covid-19. Thank you for doing your healing work.

This incredible story, 36 years after the fire, reminds us of one simple truth. What we do in the midst of the fire, the courage we show, the people we help, the hope we radiate, the love we share, the times we listen, the times we care, has a life of its own. *Ein lahem shiur*. There is no limit to the good that can flow from our decency and humanity. On December 30, 1983, when he saved her life, this courageous firefighter could never have known that some 36 years later, people's lives in an overcrowded emergency room in the height of a pandemic were going to be saved by the very baby he saved from the fire that fateful day.

All of which raises this question for your Rosh Hashanah lunch table: What infinite good can *you* do in the fire in this new year? Shana tova.