

A Way to Celebrate Light in the Darkness

WRITTEN BY

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In *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, best-selling author Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests that every tragedy has two parts, the uncontrollable and the controllable. We cannot control the curve balls life throws at us, but we can control how we respond to them.

Bad things happening to good people can never be rationalized or justified, but they can be sources of amazing courage, faith and, above all, goodness. Not every cloud has a silver lining, but cloudy days are often followed by sunny ones. We have all seen suffering which leads to goodness, even to greatness.

We are seeing that in the response to the deadly Coronavirus. American Jewish Committee's [#BeAMensch](#) initiative celebrates that essential humanity, by telling the stories of *menschen*, good people. The tales of goodness, even greatness, inspire us. We rise up to recognize those who have stepped up, the bystanders who have become upstanders.

One of the most quoted teachings of the Jewish tradition is, "When one saves a life, it is as if an entire world has been saved." Most of us go through life without direct ability to fulfill this aspiration. After all, most of us are

not doctors or nurses, police officers or firefighters. We do our best when we can, perhaps by donating blood or contributing to organizations seeking cures for the diseases which afflict humanity. But with Covid-19 we are learning that our own behavior can save lives and slow the pandemic through responsible behavior, social distancing, washing our hands incessantly, canceling our gatherings, staying at home as much as possible. This time we all have the ability to save lives, to be a *mensch*.

The risk to life has led to unavoidable physical isolation, particularly of the bereaved, the stricken, and the at-risk, especially but not only the elderly. But the goodness, the greatness, is shining through. My family was moved by the phone call we received from a lay leader of our home synagogue, part of an outreach to every one of the congregation's hundreds of households, making the inquiries that are often asked at the now-closed houses of worship: how are you, what do you need, how can I help? They will be followed up with food deliveries, facilitation of medical needs, regular check-ins. These are small things for the doer, but great things for the receiver.

There is a surrealness that will have to become routine in the short run. If we are blessed with elderly parents, both they and we need to be in touch as best as possible, benefitting from FaceTime, Zoom and the like.

Recently we went to visit my parents. It was a mild day. They bundled up and sat on the front porch while some of their descendants engaged them from the front lawn at a safe distance. The new normal. Our recent food shopping necessarily included provisions for some who are at risk and can't go out. In this crisis, we have all been given the gift of expressing *menschlichkeit*, our humanity, our inner goodness.

We at AJC have had the opportunity to reach out to our lay leaders whom we normally regularly see to make sure they and their families are doing well. These conversations have taught us the power of outreach, the importance of being engaged in the lives of our lay partners, loved ones, friends, and co-workers. Who knew that massive Zoom videoconferences would unexpectedly draw work colleagues closer? The face that is now attached to a name. The home "office" which humanizes with the wonderful interruptions by children. When the crisis is over, let's remember these lessons and incorporate them into our lives.

The biblical Ruth is the quintessential ancestral paradigm of #BeAMensch. Take the fifteen minutes needed to (re-)read her story, readily available in your home bible or via a quick Google. It will bring solace at a time of need. Ruth suffered devastating pain and loss, but never lost her humanity. She became the personification of lovingkindness and loyalty. She was blessed to be the progenitor of King David, of Jesus in the Christian tradition.

Send us your #BeAMensch stories, your celebrations of light in the darkness. Tell us about *menschlichkeit*, humanity, goodness at [AJC.org/BeAMensch](https://www.ajc.org/BeAMensch)

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