

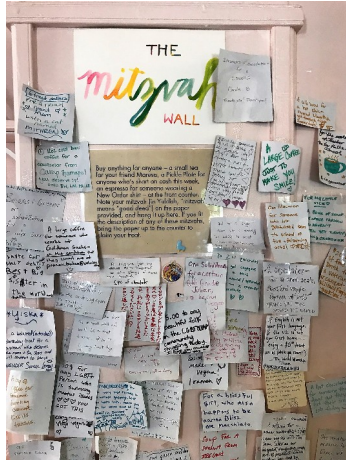
From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

Devar Torah for Yizkor

The Mitzvah Wall

5778



Last night I shared with you my “going antiquing” experience in New Paltz, NY. Today I would like to share with you another unique experience, which I guess could have happened anywhere, but as a matter of fact it did happen in New Paltz, NY, as well.

I am sure you know that when you travel out of New York City, either north, east, south, or west, availability of kosher establishments decreases at a rate of four less kosher restaurants per mile, so when you finally arrive in New Paltz, after driving for 85 miles, the number of kosher restaurants is zero.

A very good option for most Conservative keeping-kosher-people, and for many modern orthodox as well, are vegetarian restaurants or even better vegan ones. Basically you take away meat products and to make it even safer, fish, eggs, and dairy products, and you solved 99% of your kosher problem (you may still have the issue of non-kosher wines but it usually doesn't affect your meal).

For your joy, happiness and convenience, we found out in advance –again, thanks to Zoe Baker- that there was not one but two full exclusively vegan restaurants in the Village of New Paltz, in addition to a full vegan chocolate store.

The two vegan restaurants in New Paltz are *Karma* and *Lagusta's Luscious Commissary* and if you visit New Paltz, you should actually try both of them, and of course you wouldn't end a meal without some delicious artisanal vegan chocolate.

In any event, out of the two restaurants, Silvia and I liked Karma a little more, but it was at *Lagusta's Luscious Commissary*, the one we liked a little less, that we found a Jewish connection. At *Lagusta's Luscious Commissary*, a little on the right of the cash register, you can find a "mitzvah wall." Not a "good deed" wall, or a "kindness" wall, but a "mitzvah wall."

If there is a "mitzvah wall," we thought, it must be a Jewish story. So I did some research and found the Jewish connection, namely, Lagusta Yearwood, the Jewish owner of *Lagusta's Luscious Commissary*.




"Veganism is Yearwood's passion – writes Jeremiah Horrigan, from Hudson valley One. Her shops represent her efforts to demonstrate veganism's attractions and benefits to unbelievers while feeding the needs of its converts ... Her mother [Lagusta's mother] was a lifelong journalist who worked primarily for the Chicago Jewish News. Yearwood attributes her presence on the Planning Board – as demanding and thankless a task as there is in any community – to her mother's influence. Her mother's influence is also the inspiration of a recent addition to the Commissary: a mitzvah wall. 'My mom raised me with the kind of quiet, Jewish belief that you just have to do these little good things. Hence the Planning Board. But the idea of a mitzvah is that you do it anonymously: a little nice thing that makes someone's day better.'


Here's where the mitzvah wall comes into play: A customer can purchase a treat of any sort for anyone who may be short of cash or merely in need of a pick-me-up. The customer can describe someone as imaginatively as they wish – a lonely


vegan, a kilt-wearing Scot yearning for a good cup of tea, a blue-eyed dog-lover – and post their offering in a note to the wall. When someone matching the description comes along, they can claim their iced coffee or pickle plate or macaroon.”

I couldn't resist the *mitzvah wall*, and after ordering my meal, I gave \$5 to the cashier, took a post-it note and wrote on it: "A \$5 treat to someone who feels down and can use some encouragement." And below I wrote: "There is someone caring for you out there. Things will get better!" I stapled my note on the *mitzvah wall* and took some time to read the unclaimed notes:

 "A large coffee, just to make you smile!"

 "If English is not your first language and the US Is not your first home, enjoy a \$5 treat on us!"

 "\$10 treat for any person who is surviving mental illness."

 \$20 worth of food or drink for a veteran or current military family.

I then spent some time looking for a post-it note that read: "*bottle of Pappy Van Winkle bourbon for Argentinean rabbi,*" but didn't find one.

In any event, a "*mitzvah wall*" – what a wonderful idea!

The *mitzvah wall* has been there for a few months already, maybe even a year or longer, and still works well. It appeared that people didn't abuse the honor system –like faking to be someone they were not to get a free coffee- but it was evident from the many post-it notes still on the wall, that there were more people eager to give than to take.

As an apropos note, let me share with you one of my strongest beliefs backed by years of rabbinical experience: when you trust people and expect the best from them, you usually get back the best from them.

My experience with the "mitzvah wall" at Lagusta's Commissary vegan restaurant in New Paltz, made me think that life works pretty much as a "mitzvah wall." I arrived in this world 51 years ago and found a post-it note that read: "two lovely parents, safe home, warm meals, loving grandparents and uncles, and rich heritage waiting for cute Jewish Argentinean baby born in Buenos Aires in the month of December."

I grabbed my Post-it, claimed my treats, and here I am.

Then other post-it notes came: good education, fun vacations, great camp experiences, loyal friends, life changing opportunity in America, loving and caring congregants...

Of course I grabbed all my post-it notes and claimed my treats.

Did I leave some post-it notes behind for others to claim in the mitzvah wall of life?

I believe I did but not enough. That's why I believe God keeps giving me good days to live; not to grab more treats, but to leave some for others. I know it doesn't work like that but I still like to think that if I keep myself busy posting notes in the mitzvah wall of life, God will have a vested interest in me, and in each of you if you do the same.

קָרָב בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה הַמּוֹתָה לְחַסִּידָיו

"*Precious in the eyes of Hashem is the death of His righteous people!*" (Psalms 116:15) –exclaims the Psalmist in Hallel.

I like to suggest that the verse is teaching us that God feels the void when a good person leaves this world. If you made a difference, if you left many post-it notes for others to claim, God is going to feel the void when you are not here any longer. And I like to say something presumptuous: When my time comes to leave this world, I like God to feel my absence, I like God to ask: where is Manes? I miss him.

The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud Taanit 23a) tells us a story: *One day Honi was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree; he asked him, how long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit?*

The man replied: seventy years.

He [Honi] then further asked him: are you certain that you will live another seventy years?

The man replied: I found [grown] carob trees in the world; as my ancestors planted for me so I too plant for my children.

How many trees and post-it notes did each of us find in the mitzvah wall of life? How many opportunities were given to us? How many doors were open for us? How much love was shared with us by many present here today and by many who preceded us in life?

There is only one way to truly pay it back: to pass it forward. *"As my ancestors planted for me so I too must plant for others."*

How many post it notes are you going to leave in the mitzvah wall for others to claim? Don't wait too long. The time for action is now, before the doors close.

As we recall our loved ones and the many post-it notes they left for us in the Mitzvah-wall of life, we cherish their blessings and promise to honor their memory by passing them forward. As they planted for us, we must plant for others.

In this sacred hour, we ask You, God, one more time to bless us with a year of joy and health, peace and fulfillment, with a good and sweet year. Amen.

Amen.