

Each Person Can Make a Difference: Thoughts on Parashat Va-et-hanan, August 13, 2011

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By

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This week's Torah portion includes the instruction that we do that "which is right and good in the sight of the Lord" (Devarim 6:18). Rabbinic tradition has understood this phrase to mean that we are required not merely to follow the letter of the law (that which is right), but to be compassionate beyond what the exact law demands (that which is good). If we can conduct ourselves on this level of righteousness, we can live better lives for ourselves and can impact on the improvement of society.

People sometimes feel that the world is filled with cruelty and injustice but that they can do nothing to change things. The evils are simply too great, and we are too small and insignificant to make any real impact.

The Torah reminds us to do that which is right and good, to exert ourselves to the best of our ability. We should not be discouraged by the magnitude of the problems that face us, nor should we underestimate the role we can play if only we were to exert ourselves properly.

One of the inspiring personalities in the history of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City is Maud Nathan (1862-1946). She was a Daughter of the American Revolution, with deep roots in American life. A founder and first President of Shearith Israel's Sisterhood (established in 1896), she was an indomitable activist on behalf of creating a just and harmonious society.

Maud Nathan was a leader in the women's suffrage movement, and became an international spokesperson for women's rights. Theodore Roosevelt appointed her as head of the women's suffrage movement of his National Progressive Party.

Among her singular achievements, she served as President of the Consumers' League of New York from 1897 to 1917. She and her colleagues strove to ameliorate the terrible working conditions of young women who worked in New York's department stores and shops. The basic insight of the Consumers' League was that social ills could be solved by positive action on the part of many. Instead

of condemning the offending stores and shops, the Consumers' League created a "white list" of businesses that provided proper working conditions and pay. Consumers were urged to patronize stores on the "white list", thus creating pressure on all stores to upgrade working conditions so they could earn a place on this list. Through persistent hard work and ongoing negotiations with employers, the Consumers' League brought about a monumental change in the status quo. The success depended on the daily decisions of thousands of consumers. Individually, their decisions might have seemed unimportant. Cumulatively, though, the impact was enormous.

Just as Maud Nathan sought to enhance the civil rights of women and to improve the working conditions of store clerks, she strove to create greater harmony among the various segments of society. She was one of the few Jewish women of her era to work together with Christian women on joint social and philanthropic projects. She believed that anti-Semitism and racial prejudice could be diminished if people of all backgrounds had opportunities for positive interactions.

In her book, "Once Upon a Time and Today", she reminded her readers: "Prejudice produces humiliation which is not easy to bear. And the sad part is that the nature becomes warped and the spirit of kindness and friendliness is changed into bitterness and resentment. To live in peace, there must be mutual confidence, trust, cooperation, no antagonism. How often, instead of mutual respect for differing spiritual values, there is suspicion, intolerance."

Although she herself had felt the stings of anti-Semitism, she took pride in the fact that she had "been able to make her protest count." Through her persistence, hard work and idealism, she did that which was right and good in the sight of the Lord—and in the sight of her fellow human beings.

Instead of feeling frustrated and powerless by the problems of our world, we need to remember the example set by Maud Nathan. If we energize ourselves and engage in joint action with others, we can achieve important progress. We should not become overwhelmed by the vastness of the problems that confront us, but should focus on the particular area/s where we can best succeed in fostering positive change. A lot of individual decisions can result in remarkable change for the good.

"And you shall do that which is right and good in the sight of the Lord."

[Angel for Shabbat](#)