



The Ice Bucket Challenge

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You've seen it. Maybe you have even done it. If you have been on social media at all this past month, you know about the ALS ice bucket challenge. What began as a simple dare – dump a bucket of ice on your head or write a \$100 check to an ALS charity – has caught on like wildfire, raising unprecedented sums for the very worthy cause of research to combat this terrible disease.

Some variants of the challenge have been around at least since 2013, with people challenging themselves first to jump into a cold lake or pool, then transforming into the more familiar ice bucket challenge for various charities. According to some, this particularly successful version for ALS originated among pro golfers, when golf pro Chris Kennedy challenged his cousin Jeanette Senerchia, whose husband suffers from ALS. She wrote him back “Are you kidding?” but he urged her, “Come on, it will be fun.” And indeed it has been, for millions.

Then, in what many agree was the key moment, former Boston College baseball star Pete Frates, who had become a passionate activist for more attention to the disease when he had originally been diagnosed, was introduced to the challenge by a friend who was connected to Jeannette via social media.

Pete had said back in 2012, “I want to be the cliché game-changer. I want to be the guy who shifts everyone’s thinking and shifts where the funds are going.” In recognizing the potential of leveraging this person-to-person challenge for ALS, he has more than accomplished that goal.

Friends and athletes across the country began doing it in Pete's honor. Then it spread to whole teams, friends of friends, celebrities, us. In less than a month it has spread across the world.

The ice bucket challenge has generated good will, good action, great contributions – in one month the ALS association raised more than double what it had raised in the entire previous year – and, of course, it has generated lots of good times for those who participate.

But it has also generated some negative push-back. While it has morphed into the ice bucket and a small donation to charity, it began as an or, raising critiques about what people are calling “slacktivism.” Slacktivism is the notion that you do not have to actually give money to a charity; just doing something wacky and fun-loving to spread the word on social media is enough. Raising awareness, this slacktivism dogma goes, is the most important currency, real currency a second thought.

Those who level this critique point out that there's a certain narcissism involved in “look at me” awareness-raising that actually interferes with the real needs of those suffering with the disease.

After all, it is possible to post your clip of dumping ice water over your head, name-drop who you are accepting from and who you are challenging, say the three letters ALS, and call it a day. No need to teach about the disease. No need to get involved with those battling the disease now. No need to even give money to help with research. Although you might give a token amount should you feel so moved, the ultimate goal is reached not by the money donated but the “likes” received.

This, critics point out, has ramifications not only for ALS fundraising but for any number of important issues of our day. Worried about Israel? No problem, just post a link to an article. Concerned about ISIS? Not sure what to do? Just make sure to let others know about the horror ISIS is inflicting across the Middle East and congratulate yourself on doing “something.” Ferguson troubling you? Write a comment about tolerance and diversity and call it a day.

And while there is something in each of us that naturally recoils from that slacktivist perspective of “upload it and unload it” from our to-do list of actual action to be taken, we have also learned from the media’s coverage of Israel in recent months that the pen can indeed be powerful, causing damage like a sword. It is not wrong to say that our virtual pens, amplified by the power of social media, can be a mighty force for good.

It is true that there is a certain amount of egoism that allows us to think our words, our posts, matter. But that is exactly the kind of egoism our Jewish tradition encourages with teachings like “*Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor*” “It is not up to you to complete the task, but you must not refrain from starting.” And “*Lo ta'amod al dam re-echa*” “Do not stand idly by the blood of your brother.”

We are taught by our tradition again and again to raise our voices, not to be a bystander but an upstander. The ice bucket challenge has proven to be an incredibly effective way to do that.

Which leads to the second critique of the challenge. It is one that was powerfully expressed in a post I received on my Facebook feed this week showing a small boy in a bleak African landscape crouched next to a tiny dirty stream. The caption: “Let me get this straight: You waste clean water as a challenge to avoid raising money for charity?”

If you are in this camp, you might point out that the cost of store-bought ice, a bucket, and water can exceed the token \$10 that people have started to give to ALS charities. Moreover, it makes sense to argue that people should do away with the “look at me” feature and instead just quietly donate at least the money that is otherwise being spent on ice and water. After all, the great Jewish scholar Maimonides taught us that the highest order of *tzedakah* is to give anonymously, without fanfare.

The ice bucket challenge surely misses the highest level of charity. But to say the challenge is wrong for this reason is to miss the fact that Maimonides very intentionally laid out other levels of charity as well. Our tradition has a strong bias that it is much better to give on the lower rungs than not to give at all.

Furthermore, there is a quirky Jewish read on *tzedakah* which is embodied in a small item that you may have in your home – a *tzedakah* box.

Why, the rabbis asked, should one spend money, let alone a great deal of money, on a beautiful *tzedakah* box? Wouldn't the money you spend on a precious box be better spent on charity itself? No, they respond. Why not? Because of human nature. Human nature dictates that having a beautiful vessel we are proud to display prominently in the center of our home will inspire us to see it often, feel good about it, and fill it with more money in the long run. The rabbis called this *hidur mitzvah*, beautifying a mitzvah. We do it with our *tzedakah* boxes. We do it with our *menorahs* at *Chanukah*. We do it with our *lulav* and *etrog* on *Sukkot*. And we do it with the ice bucket challenge, making fun, social, and festive the act of giving to *tzedakah*.

Perhaps we might worry that charity is a zero-sum game, that what people give to ALS now they will subtract from the charities they have already committed to later. Furthermore, the challenge itself, most problematically, does not teach about ALS itself. People are not left any wiser or more compassionate; they just do it.

That, it seems to me, is what makes the ice bucket challenge so Jewish. After all, we are the people who said “*Na’aseh v’nishma*” “I will do it then I will learn.” Each of the people who donate – and the ALS Association now has more than 739,000 new donors on its mailing list – will now be open to receiving educational information and therefore more likely to donate again.

The Talmud teaches, “*Gadol ha’meh’aseh yoter min ha’oseh*” “The one who inspires others to give is even greater than the one who gives.” That is the mitzvah the ice bucket challenge fulfills. It enables us to inspire each other to bring out the best in ourselves. But most importantly, it inspires us to reach beyond our normal sphere of concern and, as our *parasha* this morning instructs, turn our hearts and our hands to the vulnerable among us through *tzedakah*. In so doing, we become not only do-ers of *mitzvot* but inspirers of *mitzvot*, giving the gift of a virtuous cycle that spins around the world.

It is a cycle that matters not just in abstract terms but for real people. Anthony Carbajal’s ice bucket challenge starts out playful and silly, with him getting drenched in a funny bathing suit to loud music. But then he goes inside and tears up. He says, “I have been terrified of ALS my whole life. My grandmother had it. My mother was diagnosed when I was in high school. Five months ago I was diagnosed with it at 26 years old...”

The video cuts to him taking care of his mother, who cannot move on her own. She looks like a rag doll in his hands. He somberly reflects on those hands and how at such a young age he is already feeling them atrophy, the first shutting down of his own body.

“I hate talking about it,” he continues. “That’s probably why nobody talks about it ... usually when I say to somebody I have ALS... the conversation shuts down... This is the first successful advocacy we’ve ever really had. I am so so so grateful. You have no idea how each challenge makes me feel, lifts my spirits, lifts every single ALS patient’s spirits.”

We have two friends here in our shul who are battling this disease. Israeli biotech is making progress on a treatment. Every challenge, every contribution, matters.

The greatest strength of the ice bucket challenge is that it reminds us of how very many challenges we still have left to heal the countless broken places in need of our attention all over our world.

Our *parasha Re'eh* warns: the need for *tzedakah* will never cease from the earth. We can be dismayed and overwhelmed by that. Or we can be inspired, as Rashi teaches, that it is our responsibility, and also our opportunity, to step up, again and again, through charities near to our hearts and some we have only just begun to be exposed to, to help as God's partners, to bring hope by saying *Hineini*, I am here.

Gadol ha'me'aseh – great is the one who not only gives but inspires others to give, to act, to make a difference.

Re'eh means “see.” On this Shabbat morning, may we see each other, as Anthony pleaded we see him. Faced with the challenge of responding to the suffering we see in our world, whether for ALS, for Israel, or for the multitude of worthy *tzedakah* opportunities we are given every day, may each of us grab the bucket of opportunity early and often. To the challenge of our *parasha* today to give more and do more, may we respond with courage and with joy, “I accept.”