

Two new parents were sitting in a park together with their infants. One put the newspaper down and complained that the world his child must grow up in is such a mess. The other parent said that she was thankful for her child to grow up in this world. "How can you say that," the astonished parent asked? "Because," she said, "if my child did not have this world to live in, he wouldn't have any world. This world is the only one we got." In a Midrash G-d says: "O human child of mine, I plead with you know that the world I made for you is the only world I have for you. Please take care of it because if you do not I have no other world to give you."

I went to visit a congregant at Christ Hospital and had to wait in the hall for a few moments when the nurse was completing a procedure with her. I watched another nurse caring for someone and I was absorbed by the kindness with which she treated her patient. Her kindness was overflowing.

I then noticed above me a video screen. On it was a teaching by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. "When I was young," Heschel said, "I used to admire intelligent people; as I grow older, I admire kind people." Can you imagine, learning Heschel at Christ hospital!

Karen Armstrong maintains that most people are more interested in power and being right than being kind and compassionate. How many of us when prioritizing the most important things in life include kindness and compassion? How many of us when instructing our children about what is truly important in life teach them that kindness and compassion must be at the top of their lists?

Shimon HaTzaddik of the 3rd century CE, taught that acts of loving kindness, gemilut hasadim, make up one of the three pillars that sustain the entire universe. Our rabbis tell us that gemilut hasadim is greater than tzedakah because tzedakah is done only with our property, only with the poor and only with the living. Gemilut hasadim, kindness, is done with our property and personal selves, with the poor and the rich and with the living and those who have died—for example by attending to a burial. Kindness is not politeness or being superficially pleasant. Kindness is an energy that comes from the deepest places of our being; kindness is powerful, kindness changes lives.

We are an ancient people who understand that without kindness life cannot go on. Judaism is not, however, abstract; it is lived through words and actions. Rabbi Berl Wein explains that every act of kindness, no matter how superficial or inconspicuous it may seem is significant. Survivors relate that the smallest and simplest act of kindness—even just a smile or a helping hand--gave them what they needed to keep fighting to stay alive for another day. Kindness comes from within—how much or how little we have is a reflection of who we truly are.

What is the difference, for example when driving, between letting someone change lanes and speeding up or in some other way not allowing the driver in? What is the difference between saying to a waitress: "This coffee is cold bring me another cup?" and saying,

“Could you please bring me another cup of coffee, this one is cold?” Why are so many children cruel and abusive to other children--on the ball field, at parties, on the bus and in their own homes? Without exception, someone has been unkind to these children bullies. Why do we have to do bring specialists into our schools every year to deal with this problem of bullying?

Henrietta Szold wrote that the greatest art of all is the art of living—and the best preparation for the art of living is the cultivated heart. Rabbi Lori Foreman points out that the foundations of a cultivated heart are caring, concern and compassion. Sometimes I walk into the office and can tell that a staff member is upset. Very often, the reason is because someone was nasty to our staff member. Why do individuals choose meanness, nastiness and unkindness to relate to other human beings? Why do we use our power of speech so often to insult, attack and hurt others? Very often, it is about not getting our way. Too often, when we do not get our way, we treat others disrespectfully.

The opposite of treating people this way is treating another—whether we know the person or not—with care, concern and compassion. A true story tells us of Herman and Roma Rosenblat. The tale began in Schlieben, a German concentration camp, where Herman, a Polish Jew, spent his teen years. One cold evening in 1942, Herman noticed a girl hiding behind a tree across a barbwire fence. He called to her and asked if she had anything to eat. From her coat, the girl tossed him an apple and some bread. This scene would repeat every evening for six months. Herman was transferred to another camp and before leaving, to protect her, he told the girl not to return. After the war Herman immigrated to New York and was studying to be an electrician. A classmate wanted to fix him up on a blind date with a young woman also from Poland. After initial resistance he accepted and had a great time. As they shared stories she told him about tossing apples and bread to a young boy in a concentration camp. They married six months later. The apple and bread came out of Roma Rosenblat’s pockets; where did her kindness come from?

An urgent Jewish question—raised by Heschel and others—is what is it to be a compassionate voice in the world? What is it to be a kind presence? What do we teach our children as to loving kindness actually being a force that sustains the universe? Do you believe this? I do more and more as time goes by. When we vote, when we support or do not support different issues and causes, when we think about the disenfranchised in our society, when we think about others different from us, when we speak to employees and service people, when we think of non-Jews, when we think of other Jews, do we do so with kindness? Will we begin doing so now?

One of the rabbis’ favorite names for G-d is HaRahaman—the Merciful One. The Torah enumerates thirteen attributes of love and kindness of G-d—the shelosh esreh midot. These are central to our High Holy Day services beginning on Selihot and culminating during Neilah at the end of Yom Kippur. We are created in the image of G-d. When the rabbis wrestled with what this means they concluded it means that we are to imitate G-d.

G-d is merciful and compassionate and we are to be merciful and compassionate. G-d is loving and kind, we are to be loving and kind.

The Talmud tells us that the Torah begins with an act of loving kindness—G-d making clothes for Adam and Eve—and ends with an act of loving kindness—G-d burying Moses. The Talmud sees G-d as a parent teaching by example that the central concept of life is to be kind: to care for others to think of their needs. The Torah begins with the letter bet—Bereshit—and ends with the letter lamed--Yisrael. These two letters give us the Hebrew word for heart—lev. In other words, the entire Torah is contained within a heart—G-d's heart that is to fill our hearts.

Teachings like these cause us to be so concerned when Jews behave without kindness, without heart. When we behave with disdain and disrespect toward another human being we are not living as G-d wants us to.

We have been commanded 36 times in the Torah not to treat anyone like the Egyptians treated us. We must worry about any hurt or damage we cause by our actions and words. We are a people who imagine that when we cause pain to others, G-d feels their pain and hears their cries. What more horrific aberration is there than there actually being people who find pleasure in other people's misfortune and pain and individuals who may not find pleasure but who do not lose any sleep over the suffering of others.

According to the Kabbalah the central sefirah, the central emanation of G-d in the universe, is the sixth sefirah. This sefirah is known by the Hebrew word tiferet which means beauty. The more traditional synonymous name for this sefirah is rachamim, rachmonos in Yiddish, which means compassion. This sefirah is considered to be the heart of the universe; in other words, the heart of the universe is beauty and beauty is defined as compassion. So many are preoccupied with physical beauty and attractiveness when there is so much inner ugliness for us to deal with. Ugliness has been defined as unkindness and true and lasting beauty as kindness.

To be Jewish is to show mercy even as the rabbis emphasize, to the undeserving. When we study the Torah we are to have in depth encounters with the characters we meet. As Ramban of the thirteenth century teaches, we are to regard our biblical characters as prototypes from whom we are to learn about life. For example, the first Jew, Abraham, teaches us to be caring, concerned and compassionate as he was even towards the people of Sodom and Gamorrah. He wasn't interested when he argued with G-d in whether they were deserving of being spared; he argued on their behalf in spite of who they were because of his kindness. It is easy to be nice to people we know and like; the mitzvah, however, is trying our best to be kind to everyone; no easy feat. Another biblical character, Jonah, teaches us what not to do. G-d castigates Jonah for not wanting to help the people of Nineveh because they were not Jews. G-d admonishes Jonah for not appreciating that these people were also G-d's children. When our rabbis chose this reading for Yom Kippur they, wanted us to never lose sight of the fact that all human beings are equal and all human beings deserve our respect, consideration and compassion. How many of us have attitudes about non-Jews and others who are different and live differently than us?

Think of all the opportunities to be kind that we pass up either because we do not care or because we have concluded that a certain person does not deserve our kindness. Philo of the first century BCE charged us to be kind knowing that everyone is fighting a hard battle. In Yiddish, everyone carries a peckel of troubles, challenges, worries and problems. If for no other reason, we should be kind to each other because we know how we feel carrying our own peckel and how much it helps when someone is supportive and understanding. When we have an opportunity to lighten someone's load, why in the world do we not do it? How often do we make each other's load heavier including sometimes our own?

Kindness is so transformative that Rabbi Nehunia bar HaKannah considered acts of kindness to be equal to the sin offerings that were brought to the Temple. It pains me when I see someone treat another unkindly. Sometimes it is by not saying or doing something. When we know another needs encouragement, or needs to be included and invited, or needs to be listened to and we do not do these things, we are being unkind. There are sins of commission and sins of omission. When we pass up an opportunity to be kind we are passing up a mitzvah and are accountable.

Writer Pavlo Coehlo reminds us that "being with people and making anyone feel as if he or she is of no importance in our life is far worst than being miserable ourselves." I wish I could tell you as your rabbi that I never make anyone feel that way and that I never say or do anything unkind, but I cannot. I can tell you that whenever I am unkind I feel miserable and that by hurting this person I feel as if I damaged G-d's world. Our great teacher Shammai insisted that we always greet each other with a pleasant countenance. How different would our world be if we just did that? If we were just friendly and pleasant to each other?

"Give of yourself; you can always give something even if it is only kindness; no one has ever become poor from giving." Ann Frank wrote these words. Centuries before, Rambam, Maimonides, taught that no one ever becomes poor from giving charity. Rabbi Lori Forman laments that our society breeds cynicism that leads to indifference and callousness, not to compassion and kindness. Our society has created and is passing down a perverted value system where kindness is not a strength and is even perceived by many as a weakness. Rabbi Forman is concerned that we only think of kindness, if we do at all, when we are in synagogue. This being said, we have to consider all the unkind thoughts and words that surface in every synagogue even during Yom Kippur?

When visiting a shiva house a mourner is not to thank us just as when we give money to a poor person, we are not to be thanked. We are doing a mitzvah. When we give of ourselves through charity or compassion, we the givers are the recipients. When we give away our money, on one level we have less but on another level we have much more; the same is true when we give our concern and care to another. The Dalai Lama teaches that when we feel love and kindness toward others, it not only makes others feel loved and cared for, but it helps us also to develop inner happiness and peace. It is a metaphysical principle known as increase through decrease: having more by giving more.

We are so misled by quantity as compared to quality, by things instead of principles, by self-interest instead of self awareness, by personal gain instead of personal fulfillment and by winning instead of truly living, that we are not able to appreciate what our rabbis knew and taught: loving kindness sustains the very existence of our universe; power, fortune and fame do not. Our mystics saw compassion as not only beautiful but as being the heart of the universe. The art of being kind is all our sad and hurting world needs. Kindness can only come from us and every act of kindness no matter how seemingly small is huge. Reb Nahman of Bratslav taught that to bring just a little joy to someone, to be just a little kind, is a very big, big thing to do. How different would our sad and hurting world be if just all of us here this Kol Nidrei evening would genuinely take this to heart? No one else, just us?

A proverb tells us that the highest wisdom is kindness. When we think of what the Dark Ages were like, we should consider the darkness of our times measuring wisdom as kindness. If you want to know darkness go to Darfur? If you want to know darkness think of everything we could be doing and are not. Kindness sustains the universe. Life is not being sustained in Darfur; it is being destroyed. The dark ages exist wherever and whenever people are being cruel and unkind; and whenever other people do not do everything possible to stop unkindness and the suffering and death it causes. Just as kindness is powerful, unkindness is equally so.

Yom Kippur is the perfect time to consider honestly how kind we are and how much kinder we need to be in the year ahead. I devote this Kol Nidrei to the mitzvah of being kind at a time in our world that is so filled with fear, hatred, distrust, ambition and so much unkindness. We are living in a time that needs loving kindness so very, very much. It must start right here, right now, with each and every one of us.

Henry James said that three things in life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind. So, we go back to those two parents with infants in the park. One complaining that his child must grow up in this world and the other being thankful for this world seeing that it is the only one we have.

The question then becomes what are we going to do about it? How are we going to make this one and only world we have a world that parents will not lament having to raise their children in and a world that our children will be thankful for us giving it to them? On this Kol Nidrei night we see and know what G-d wants of us. Like Heschel let us admire kind people and want to surround ourselves with them; let each of us be a truly kind person that others will admire and want to be surrounded by. Let us teach our children that kindness is the greatest strength of all and that when we behave kindly, we are behaving like G-d.

Splinter night into a sky of stars?
Change the stony heart of man
Into a heart of love?

Is there time enough, O G-d?
Is there time enough?

One of my favorite people, Red Skelton, in his elderly wisdom said: "I do not know where I've been or what I've done, but I would not have missed it for anything." I hope no one here will have missed the opportunity to live, to make a difference and to realize what one's purpose being alive is: to be G-d's partner in bringing healing, kindness and peace to our world. This is the only reason we have been born. Knowing this as the truth as to the purpose of our existence is the great insight of life that is to help us confront our own mortality by living profound lives rich with meaning and fulfillment. Rabbi James Rudin taught that we should always be concerned that after we are gone whether it will be said about us that life was good to us or we were good to life.

On this Yom Kippur, before Yizkor, let us make a solemn promise to do our very best to be just, loving and humble as we walk through G-d's world. On this Yom Kippur may we all be blessed by having something profound take place within us. May this happen today and everyday. May not a single one of us ask where is the life I lost when I was so busy living? Rather, may each of us ask what more can I do with the life I am so profoundly blessed with today?