

KOL NIDREI
5776

A rich man was taking a drive in the country in his limousine when he saw a family by the side of the road eating grass. He told his chauffeur to stop and back up. The man got out and approached them and asked: "What are you doing? The father explained: "We have no money and all we can do to survive is eat grass." The rich man said: "Come on, I am going to take you home with me." They walked together to the limousine and they all got in. The father said with tears in his eyes: "You are the kindest man we ever met." The rich man replied: "It really is nothing." The father then went on: "You are taking me, my wife and our four children home with you; we have never experienced such compassion." The rich man responded: "It really is no big deal; I have acres of grass twelve inches tall."

When our rabbis asked how are we created in the image of G-d, they answered by saying as G-d is compassionate so shall we be compassionate. To have compassion, *rachamim* or the Yiddish, *rachmanus*, is a mitzvah and like all mitzvot we are free to fulfill it or not. Does the name Kathy Binns mean anything to you? She is Todd Portune's chief of staff who fell downtown last month and no one would stop to help her. Hundreds walked by in downtown Cincinnati in the middle of the day. Finally, two immigrants helped her. Our rabbis tell us that this is the kind of behavior that led to G-d's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. The Talmud (Beitzah 32b) teaches that a person who has compassion upon others may be considered a true descendant of Abraham and Sarah. Those who are not compassionate are not their descendants. To be a Jew is to be compassionate. This is why President Rivlin of Israel is so shocked, saddened and concerned when Jews in Israel commit crimes of violence and hate.

Our Musar tradition teaches that a person is to live every day humbled by the responsibility to be compassionate always feeling as if we are not doing enough. Musar teaches us that a wise person is one who uses his or her free will to do acts of kindness. Rabbi Heschel instructs us to see that we were created to use our lives for unselfish purposes and to be caring people. The writer Lea Chase says that truly living is when a person gets up in the morning looking forward to doing something for another. How did you and I wake up this morning? Dr. Mona Fishbane teaches that to be created in the image of G-d is to feel the suffering of others like G-d felt the suffering of the Israelites in Egypt. Does this describe us?

This is what our Jewish tradition that we are so proud of teaches us. Rabbi Heschel observes that being compassionate helps us be less self-centered and more G-d-centered; being more G-d-centered means we are more concerned with others. Much is written today about how self-absorbed and self-concerned we Americans are. Judaism is altruistic; Americans are increasingly narcissistic. Hillel asked: "If I am only for myself, what am I?"

Hillel also asked: "If I am not for myself who will be?" We are told that no one can fulfill the mitzvah of "loving your neighbor as yourself" if you do not love yourself. Rabbi Abraham Hasdei of the 13th century taught: "To have compassion for another we must have

compassion toward ourselves.” Some of us are very good to others but we do not take care of ourselves. The Book of Proverbs (11:17) tells us that a wise person does good for his or her own soul and good for others. One of the best ways to do good for ourselves is to be kind and caring toward others. When we do *tzedakah* the recipient is not to thank us. Why? Because in truth the giver is the recipient.

Hasidic rabbis tell us that G-d’s loving kindness, G-d’s *chesed*, is what keeps us alive. G-d’s compassion for us who are imperfect human beings allows us to live even though we have not earned this by any righteousness of our own. Therefore, like G-d in Whose image we are created, we have to show loving kindness to those in our lives who like us are not perfect, who like us make mistakes, who like us need forgiveness. Rabbi Amitai Adler reminds us that compassion is letting another person be imperfect and make mistakes just as we are imperfect and make mistakes. When we are merciful toward those in our lives and not judgmental and condemning we are being like G-d. If G-d cuts us slack with all of our imperfection, should we not do the same for each other?

Homo sapiens are the only species of animals that will torment others intentionally and knowingly. Thus the depraved Nazi, as Paulo Coelho writes: “Is lower than the beast because the beast knows nothing of the joys of cruelty and the Nazi did.” Peter Matheissen reflects: “How woebegone humankind is in all its greed and cruelties as the only creatures capable of evil.” Rabbi Simchah Meir HaCohen of the 19th century explains that the reason the Torah commands us to leave a corner of the field for the poor is to force us to be compassionate and to keep us from turning into wild beasts.

Nicholas Kristof is concerned about the compassion gap in our country. He says that plenty of successful people see a picture of a needy child and their first impulse is not to help but to judge. Many of us do the same when we walk by a homeless person downtown. Kristof tells us that we can start shrinking this compassion gap by pointing fewer fingers at needy people and offering more helping hands. Being judgmental of poor people is not being compassionate. Paulo Freire talks about the tyranny of the moment as to the poverty crisis in our country that is created by our judgmentalism, callousness and selfishness. This, he says, is what accounts for the richest country in the history of humankind having so many homeless people and so many children going to school hungry every day. I see too many of us and our children pointing our fingers and judging.

Peter Matheissen asks in “At Play in the Field of the Lord:” “How long can a man hold his heart in his hands?” Just like the woman who lay on the sidewalk with no one stopping to help, how long can a person endure a life filled with pain and sadness with no one providing support and encouragement? There is a Yiddish saying that we feel better when we pour our hearts out. Allowing another to do this is being compassionate; listening, putting an arm around someone, having someone over for Shabbat dinner can be great acts of compassion. We must not underestimate the power of our human touch and we must teach our children about theirs.

What is the difference between giving with love or not, cooking with love or not, speaking with love or not? Charity without love we are told helps in the moment but charity with love heals the world. A warm and heartfelt “good morning” or a genuine and sincere “how you are” are acts of compassion. We must not think for a moment that a small act of kindness is not an important act of kindness. There is a beautiful Midrash about a man in the market who stops to give a homeless and hungry person money after hundreds of others passed him by. That night G-d appeared in this man’s dreams and told him that not only did he save this person physically but he saved this person’s very soul. G-d told him that if one more person would have walked by him without helping, this man would have lost all of his faith and taken his own life. Any so called religious act that is not compassionate is not religious. Rambam said (Hilchot Shabbat 2:3) that “the Torah’s laws are not meant to punish the world but meant to spread mercy, kindness and peace.” Therefore, to be genuinely a “Torah true” Jew one has to be kind and compassionate. There is a tragic irony to this today when so many self-described “Torah true” Jews are anything but compassionate and kind.

I have been to Poland three times and each time I hear accounts of extraordinary compassion that took place in the midst of unimaginable inhumanity. The camp inmates who shared the very little food they had, who took those dying of disease into their arms so that they would not die alone, who helped those sick and not able to work to get through another day so that they could stay alive and much, much more. Compassion in the camps, in the gas chambers, in the ghettos and in the woods; compassion coming from their hearts and souls because they were Jews and in spite of thousands of years of all the cruelty against us, these Jews had planted deeply within themselves the commandment to be compassionate. If they could be compassionate there and then certainly we can be compassionate here and now.

Rabbi Heschel proclaimed that every human being is commanded to be unselfish and to care for others, and that this command is not the product but the origin of civilization. Rav Kook taught that a human being’s natural state is to be kind and compassionate and when we are thinking and living correctly, as David Brooks observed, sympathy flows forth from us naturally. Not being compassionate is not being natural; it is not being human.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes about Stephen Carter who as an eleven-year-old African American moved with his family into a white neighborhood in Washington DC. His four brothers and sisters sat on the front steps waiting to see how they would be greeted by neighbors. They were not greeted at all; not even a wave, a smile or a simple hello. Their fears were coming true. Then a white woman walking down the other side of the street waved and yelled hello and went into her house. A little while later she came out with sandwiches and cold drinks for these children. This woman broke down a wall of separation and relieved these children of much anxiety and fear. Stephen Carter became a law professor at Yale and wrote a book inspired by this woman’s kindness called “Civility.” He says he can still taste the cream cheese and jelly of those sandwiches when he closes his eyes and remembers this woman’s compassion and how her kindness inspired many deeds of kindness by his siblings and him.

Joseph Campbell in his “Power of Myth” relates how in Hawaii two policemen saw a young man ready to jump off a cliff on the side of the road. They stopped, leaped out of their car and ran. One officer got to him just as he jumped and was pulled over the railing but thankfully the second officer grabbed him and was able to pull them both back to safety. When the first officer was asked why he did not let go when he was being pulled over the railing, the officer responded: “I couldn’t let go. If I had let that young man go, I couldn’t have lived another day of my life.” Thankfully, the need for such extraordinary acts of compassion is rare. This is why it is so concerning that little acts of kindness prove to be so difficult like simply stopping and helping the woman who fell in downtown Cincinnati.

A man came to see the Baal Shem Tov filled with pain about his son’s behavior. Crying he told the Baal Shem Tov that his son doesn’t pray in the morning, he doesn’t honor Shabbos anymore and he runs around, gambles and drinks. He pleaded with the Baal Shem Tov to tell him what he must do. The Baal Shem Tov said only one thing: “Love him more.” It may be tuff love but love him more. There are times when we are responsible to challenge, admonish and criticize another but we must do it with compassion and love, never with judgment and anger. What if in this way we loved our children, family, friends and others—more?

Rabbi Israel Salanter was on his death bed. His students rotated being with him so that whenever he might die his body would never be alone. A young student’s turn arrived and he sat by his rabbi’s bed; it was night and only a candle was burning. Rabbi Salanter could tell that this young student was afraid that he may be the one who would have to sit through the night with his rabbi’s body; the student had never seen a dead person and he was trembling. Rabbi Salanter spent the last hours of his life comforting and encouraging this student and waited to die until sunrise when an older student came in. Rabbi Salanter is the founder of the Musar movement that teaches us that the purpose for which every human being has been created is to help bear the burden of another. We are alive to be compassionate and caring. When we are, be it in a big way or small, we are living in G-d’s image. We must not underestimate the significance of our words and deeds and their impact on others. Compassion brings comfort and hope; compassion heals relationships and broken hearts; compassion is what will heal our shattered world—nothing else can or will.

So, when we see hungry people let us not offer them more grass to eat; let us not judge them but help them, let us not turn away from them but turn toward them, let us not look down upon them but uplift them. When we see anyone in need of any kind, let us offer them our hand and our heart. Let us all be blessed in this New Year to lift the burden of others and if we are not able, then let us be blessed to help them carry it.

A MEANINGFUL YOM KIPPUR AND FAST.

