

Loving-Kindness

I want to begin this morning's sermon with two real-life stories.

When Bud Caldwell's wife Betty, of 55 years passed away, he dedicated a park bench in her memory in their hometown of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. He visited her bench every day, always with a bouquet of fresh daisies. But then the cold winter settled in and it soon proved too difficult to walk to the bench through snow and ice. Unbeknownst to Bud, two city workers had watched his daily routine and they understood how important it was for Bud to visit the bench. Jerrod and Kevin took time out of their workday to shovel the walkway each day so that Bud could continue to visit the bench. When Bud saw what the men had done he said his knees buckled, he was so touched. The workers were interviewed about this and said, "We were just doing what we felt was our job. Some intuition, be it divine or otherwise, says this is why you're here—to help one another."

The other story is one I found in the Story Corps archives.¹ In 1941, 11 year old Phillip and his family were banished from their hometown in Poland and sent to the Zhetel ghetto with other Jewish families. He had witnessed soldiers sending people to their deaths but he noticed how they were sparing families with adults who held specific jobs, such as doctors and tailors. One day, Phillip was caught alone by a Nazi soldier and separated from his family. He saw a mother standing with two young girls and he could tell that the mother was a nurse. With incredible instincts, Phillip went over to the woman and asked if she would pretend to be his mother so his life would be spared. She replied, "If they let me leave with two children, maybe they'll let me leave with three. Hold on to my dress." They survived. Years later, by a stroke of incredible coincidence, Phillip fell in love with and married a woman who happened to be one of the two young girls.

These two stories illustrate the good in humanity and the power of kindness. There are plenty of stories that demonstrate how caring we are but in today's news cycle, they seem few and far between. When I watch the news, I see a lot of cruelty, bullying, and name-calling. I see sexism, ageism, and xenophobia. I see politicians using immigrants as political

¹ <https://storycorps.org/stories/he-survived-the-holocaust-because-of-a-strangers-kindness/>

pawns and shuttling them across the country merely for publicity. I see adults acting like children.

You might recall from a High Holy Day sermon two years ago how I talked about watching a show called “Some Good News” hosted by John Krasinsky, during quarantine. The show highlighted the good that people were doing in the early days of the pandemic. For twenty minutes each week, this show helped us to look on the bright side of humanity. A lot of the stories focused on kindness. It lifted our spirits and to this day I wish that kind of news was more mainstream. I wish our news focused more on people like Jerrod and Kevin.

In this highly charged and hyper-polarized world we live in, the one thing I want to witness more of in the year ahead is kindness. It seems so simple. How hard can it be to practice showing kindness to people we encounter on a daily basis? As it turns out, it’s not as easy as we might think.

In a 2019 Atlantic article, “America’s Epidemic of Unkindness,” “modern life has made us unkind.”² Think about it for a moment: while technology has allowed us to connect with people around the world through the internet and social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, it has unintentionally (I think) “also driven people into political silos, incited violence...eroded confidence in public institutions and scientists, and made conspiracy theorists of us all—while making us more selfish, less self-confident, and more socially isolated.”³ Modern technology has allowed people to hide behind their screens and write unkind messages in anonymity. It has never been so easy to be a jerk as it is right now. I sometimes get the sense that real personal connections are no longer fostered in this new era.

Enter Judaism. As you can imagine, our Jewish tradition has a lot of wisdom to teach about being kind to other people. And on this holiest day of the year, the message I wish for all of us to spread is to build a world of kindness.

² The Atlantic “America’s Epidemic of Unkindness” Annie Lowrey. Nov 28, 2019

³ *ibid.*

Kindness in Hebrew is translated as *chesed*, but a more accurate translation is “loving-kindness.” Already, I like where Judaism is going with this idea. It’s not just about being nice. That would be too easy. With *chesed*, there is also an element of graciousness, generosity, selflessness, and love, expressed to friend and stranger alike.

Our sacred texts suggest that *chesed* is of the utmost importance. The prophet Micah says, “What does God ask of you: only that you do justice, love *chesed*, and walk humbly with your God.”⁴ That’s it! In Psalm 89:3 we find the lyrics to a beautiful song that we sometimes sing on shabbat: *olam chesed yibaneh* “the world is built with loving-kindness.” And in Pirke Avot we read the following words which you will hear every time we march around the sanctuary with our Torah scrolls: *al shlosha devarim haolam omed: al hatorah, v'al havodah, v'al gemilut hasadim* “The world stands upon three things: on Torah, on service to God, and on acts of loving-kindness.”⁵

The fact that loving-kindness is one of the three pillars on which the world stands shows just how very important this trait must be. Alan Morinis, author of *Everyday Holiness*, writes, “The Jewish tradition elevates deeds of loving-kindness to the highest possible ranking among soul-traits. Only some problems have solutions, while all of them are alleviated by the loving response of those around us.”⁶ I can’t help but think of the mostly Venezuelan asylum seekers from Texas who were dumped in Martha’s Vineyard with no advance notice. Immigration is a tough issue to figure out, and this situation would have been a lot worse had not the residents of Martha’s Vineyard showed these fellow human beings loving-kindness.

This display of *chesed*, along with the opening stories, are just a few examples of this trait. *Chesed* is about action and connection with other people. In other words, saying that you are holding someone in your thoughts and prayers may sound nice but it’s not an example of *chesed*.

⁴ This oft-quoted verse from Micah 6:8 is written around the dome on the ceiling of my childhood sanctuary, Sherith Israel in San Francisco.

⁵ Pirke Avot 1:2

⁶ Morinis, E. Alan. *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*. Trumpeter, 2009. p. 185

And neither is holding the door open for someone or saying “thank-you.” Those are just decent things to do. With *chesed* we go deeper and offer real and genuine kindness to one another.

Behind all acts of *chesed* must lie humility and generosity. There may be no ulterior motive. Showing loving-kindness to another person cannot be driven by obligation, guilt, or the hope of getting something in return. “True *chesed* involves offering without any expectation of return, even of gratitude. Any hint of a payback underlies the very essence of *chesed*.”⁷ If you perform an act of *chesed* for someone else and they don’t thank you, let it go. Showing loving-kindness to someone can’t be followed up with bearing a grudge. The ultimate act of *chesed* is one where there can be no reciprocity. When we perform a *tahara* on newly deceased individuals and bury our loved ones, we know these acts of loving-kindness will not be acknowledged. We perform these acts purely out of love and with little ego.

Our patriarch Abraham is a model for *chesed* in the Torah. You may recall the story shortly after his circumcision at age 99. While recovering in his tent, he sees three strangers approach and instead of waiting for them to arrive at his home, he jumps up, runs over to them, and invites them to be his and Sarah’s guests. He offers them food, water, and shelter. This isn’t just a story of how hospitable Abraham is, but of how eager he was to help other people. We see this in the Hebrew verbs used to describe the scene. The text reads that Abraham “ran” and “hurried” to show *chesed* to the men who happen to be angels of God. He literally jumped at the opportunity to show loving-kindness despite being in his weakened state.

The other exemplar of *chesed* in the Tanakh is none other than God. The Torah actually begins and ends with striking examples of acts of loving-kindness. In Genesis we see God clothe Adam and Chava in the garden, echoing the *nissim b’chol yom* blessing about “clothing the naked” and then at the very end of Deuteronomy, God personally buries Moses, showing us what it means to accompany the dead to their final resting place, known as *levayat ha-met*.

⁷ Morinis, p. 187

During the High Holy Day season we recite God's thirteen attributes of compassion as stated in Exodus 34:6-7, just before we take the Torah out of the ark. God is *rav v'chesed*, abundant in loving-kindness. Morinis writes, "God shows kindness to all those who are in need of sustenance, even those who are not deserving of this help. Here we find our model for *chesed*. When we act with sustaining generosity to others not because they deserve it but because we are being kind, beyond any calculation of what they have earned from us or what we can get in return, then we are doing kindness in emulation of God's way of loving-kindness."⁸

Chesed happens to be one of the primary characteristics of the divine according to Judaism and if we are created in God's image and meant to follow God's example, then *chesed* must be a trait we take seriously as and cultivate in our own lives.

There is a Jewish saying that one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah. There is scientific truth to this. Dr. Daniel Fessler, director of the UCLA Bedari Kindness Institute, has done research which shows that kindness is contagious. In one study, he and his colleagues showed some people a video of a person helping his neighbors, while others were shown a video of a person doing parkour.⁹ All the study participants were then given some money in return for taking part, and told they could put as much as they wanted in an envelope for charity. (The researchers could not see whether the participants put money in or how much they put in.) People who saw the neighborly video were much more generous.¹⁰

Science has also proven that when we engage in acts of *chesed*, we improve our physical and mental health. Acts of loving-kindness may lead to lower blood-pressure, a positive mood, an increase in life satisfaction, and they may also stimulate the release of serotonin and oxytocin which are known as two of the "happiness" hormones. According to the

⁸ *ibid*, p. 192

⁹ From Wikipedia: Parkour is an athletic training discipline in which practitioners attempt to get from point A to point B in the most fluid way possible, without assisting equipment and in the fastest and most efficient way possible.

¹⁰ The Atlantic, "*America's Epidemic of Unkindness.*"

American Psychological Association, even observing or recalling acts of kindness have been shown to increase overall well-being.

Dr. Lara Aknin, associate professor of psychology at Simon Fraser University and director of the Helping and Happiness Lab writes, “When people give in ways that are more socially connected or relational, that seems to better unlock these emotional rewards.”¹¹ This is *chesed*; acts of loving-kindness bring us closer to one another and build lasting bonds.

As we each explore how to bring more *chesed* into the world this year, know that unlike *tzedakah* which is obligatory, acts of loving-kindness are voluntary and motivated by love. As a first step, try and see what the other person’s needs are before acting on the impulse to give. Some simple ways to show *chesed* are to sign on to a meal train and cook someone food to help them get through a rough patch. Visit someone who is sick and sit with them for a while. Support a *b’nei mitzvah* student and family and add to their *simcha*. Be present with them. We may not all get an opportunity like Jerrod and Kevin, but if we pay attention to those around us, opportunities will arise.

Novelist Henry James wrote, “Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind.”¹² On this most holy day when we plumb the depths of our souls and think about how we want to become better versions of ourselves in the year ahead, I can’t think of a better way than to practice *chesed*. If we can individually and collectively engage in acts of loving-kindness, our world, at least in our neck of the woods, will be better off. May all of us commit to spreading *chesed* near and far and may this set off a chain reaction of hearts opening and love pouring out.

¹¹ Abrams, Zara. *The Case for Kindness*. Aug 2021, <https://www.apa.org/news/apa/kindness-mental-health>

¹² Mr Rogers also said, “there are three ways to ultimate success: The first way is to be kind. The second way is to be kind. The third way is to be kind.”