

Choose Kindness

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Some may have noticed what might seem an incongruous fact about me: I'm a tall guy, but I drive a small sports car. It's a little hard to miss. Seeing me fold compactly into my tiny blue Mazda Miata convertible seems to amuse people. But it reminds me of the even smaller red Triumph Spitfire I had in college. Now, some people tend to make assumptions about middle-aged men driving around in a two-person convertible. I don't exactly know what those assumptions are, but I can imagine. In fact, I recall many years ago as I was dreaming out loud about one day buying such a vehicle, a friend of mind wisely informing me that it would be inappropriate for a rabbi to own one. "Can you imagine what people would say?" she warned me. Well, I stopped trying to imagine. I have noticed, however, that people tend to act as if I am speeding in that car, no matter how slowly I drive. I have had pedestrians admonish me and police officers give me the stink-eye despite my actual speed.

We all make assumptions about others, don't we?

The other day I had an interesting experience in my little car. As I was driving well below the speed limit through some rather winding roads, I noticed a large black SUV riding my tail. You really pay attention to the difference in size and weight when you are in a small car with the top down on a warm summer evening; and I felt fairly menaced. Even polite Portland has been known to have road rage. Then I started feeling defiant. Clearly the driver behind me wanted me to speed up and was annoyed that my little sports car, which clearly SHOULD be racing along, was blocking their progress. So, as is my nature, I decided to show my independence and defiance - by slowing down more. That'll show them!

Turned out I couldn't shake my pursuer. No matter how many turns, that big SUV kept right behind me, headlights glaring at me to speed up. I started to get nervous: what kind of danger was I putting myself in? You know the kind of people who drive those things – who knows what lengths they would go to if they found me really annoying?

My opponent followed me every step of the way – even to my final destination. My heart was pumping when I arrived – the truck had parked right behind me and the door was opening. A final confrontation was looming.

Out stepped a dear friend who was going to the same party I was. She laughed when she saw me. She said – "here's a sermon for you: I was so angry about how slow you were going – until I saw it was you. Then all my anger dissipated. See," she said "Love conquers all."

Now, I am grateful that it was my friend who jumped out of that car, instead of some violence-prone rowdy dude with attitude and a baseball bat. But I took away a different lesson than she did. Why, I wondered, did we both make assumptions about the other based on little more than the cars we drove?

Why was our instinct so ungenerous? Why didn't we start by being kind?

Much has been made about the anxiety, sadness and indeed desperation which has infected all of our souls over the course of this pandemic. Extremes of emotion engulf us as we vacillate through isolation and integration. It was not long ago that many of us were experiencing elation at the prospect of returning to normal, only to feel renewed despondency as the Delta variant has brought us back to some of the worst numbers of this pandemic and a return of familiar and unmissed restrictions. Our mood has darkened as we hear daily reports of overwhelmed hospital emergency rooms and ICUs. Our sense of being in control has been shattered by reports of breakthrough infections – even in our own Temple community.

And what I hear most from our congregants, when reflecting on their emotional state – is surprise at our own anger. Some of the most compassionate people I know, advocates for social justice and the needs of others very much unlike themselves go out of their way to report to me a sense of shame at how angry they are at the unvaccinated. They tell me their secret satisfaction at learning that some well-known vaccination denier has come down with COVID. I hear shame and surprise; but what I don't hear is remorse. Justification in their righteous anger overwhelms their more generous nature. I understand. . .we are all living with road rage these days. But what if we stepped out of our cars for a moment and tried to see each other as real, complex, vulnerable?

What if we could get back to kindness?

The Biblical word for kindness is *חסד* (*chesed*) and the rabbis use the term *גמילות חסדים* (*gimilut chasadim*) to denote acts of loving kindness. The Talmud (Sota 14a) notes that the Torah begins and ends with *גמילות חסדים* actions of kindness from G-d to humans. Rabbi Simlai¹ points out that in Genesis, G-d's first action after the creation of human beings (Gen. 3:21) is to dress them – to clothe the naked. He goes on to point out that G-d's last action in the Torah (Deut. 34:6) is to bury Moses – to honor the dead. Birth to death, these actions provide a range. The Torah exists – in this reading - to remind us to act with kindness, with compassion, with generosity towards the needs of others, whether they deserve it or not. Human beings often make choices which disappoint G-d – and yet G-d responds with kindness.

How hard it can be to remember this in our age of polarization. Political commentators and sociologists point out that in our tribalism, the failure of the other is more important than the

¹ שמלאי ר' c.250 – c.290 CE

success of our team.² We care more that our enemy loses than that we win. But this is the opposite of *TDN*. Kindness, compassion, generosity - holds us to help one another, to care about one another no matter how different, no matter if we disagree with their choices. *TDN* is G-d's response to the needs of human beings. It is G-d's light, even in troubled times. And it is within our power to choose to act, to choose to respond, with that same kindness.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes:

We live by the conviction that acts of goodness reflect the hidden light of [G-d's] holiness. [G-d's] light is above our minds but not above our will. It is within our power to mirror [G-d's] unending love in deeds of kindness, like brooks that hold the sky.³

I love Heschel's image – the brooks that hold the sky. Our acts of loving kindness are tiny streams rippling through the forest. Individually, seemingly meaningless. But they reflect the sky's worth of G-d's loving kindness. Truly, we hold the sky.

We tend to think that when our anger is justified we have no need to be kind, no need to be generous. We note with surprise our own response, but we never think to change it. And yet our anger, our "Quiet Rage of the Responsible" as Paul Krugman⁴ put it, does not make things better. It doesn't even make us feel better. We are not wrong. But we are also not kind. We find ourselves seething in our own anger, seeking out others who agree with our indignation and reinforce our rage. But we cannot find a way out of our own pit.

And, not insignificantly, our anger and righteousness does not motivate others to change. As I did when I saw what I perceived to be an angry driver behind me: I just slowed down. I doubled down on the behavior that caused the conflict. I just felt that I was right.

But we can choose to be different. We can choose to act different. We can choose to reflect G-d's *TDN* "like the brooks that hold the sky."

On Yom Kippur we read in the Torah these well-known words from the Book of Deuteronomy:

This day I call heaven and earth to witness regarding you: life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse. Choose life – so that you and your children may live. . . (Deut. 30:19)

² Ezra Klein, in his book "Why We're Polarized" points out that far from being an unwanted "glitch," the extremism we see in our politics and media is the predictable "feature" of the system. On the social dynamics of groups and competition, see Chapter 3 "Your Brain on Groups," in which Klein describes the 1970 paper by Henri Tajfel "Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination."

³ Quoted in *Mishkan Hanefesh – Machzor for the Days of Awe – Yom Kippur* (NY: CCAR Press, 2015), p. 359

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/19/opinion/covid-masks-vaccine-mandates.html>

It is fair to ask, as has been asked through the generations, “well, of course ‘Choose Life’ – who would choose death?” But the point is not the choice; it is the choosing. How we decide to live determines the kind of life we will live. Do we live in anger, in selfishness, in righteous indignation – or do we choose to live with kindness, with generosity, with compassion. We can choose not just to believe that we are kind, but to actually be kind – even when we think we are right, even when we think we are justified. Can we have the courage not to be surprised at our responses but to choose to change our response, to be more aligned with our vision of ourselves?

We begin this new year of 5782 engulfed in an unpredictable pandemic and a predictable crisis of our emotional response. We have been dragged down by our justifiable anger; but Rosh Hashanah offers us the opportunity to lift ourselves up. To act as G-d does – beginning and ending with kindness. The Torah is filled with acts of betrayal and disappointing behavior of human beings towards G-d, and yet the Torah ends as it begins: with G-d’s acts of **גמילות חסדים** (*gimilut chasadim*), loving kindness toward even the undeserving. This is our choice. We can choose life. We can choose to act as G-d does. We can choose to step out of our cars and reflect G-d’s kindness “as the brook reflects the sky.”

May we open our hearts and our actions towards compassion, towards generosity. May we, in this year of 5782, choose kindness.