

Rabbi Jacob Pressman
LOVING KINDNESS

אחרי מותי ככה ספדן לי

After I am gone, I should like my tombstone to read
“A KIND MAN”

I came to that decision recently when after we concluded our meeting about the funeral of her father, a woman turned to me and said, “You are a kind man” and it struck me that that was the nicest thing I have ever heard: not “You are wise, you are brave, strong,” but “You are a kind man,” and it struck me that that is what I have tried to be all my life.

In a world seething with violence, with nations and groups within nations dedicated to the slaughter of those they perceive to be enemies, with the unthinkable threat of atomic warfare surfacing in many places, with hatred elevated to the status of religious doctrine, with the prediction of Armageddon hanging over the head of humanity, I confess I have no master political, military, economic solution to offer. Instead I choose to speak of something which is at the heart of the solution: kindness. Kindness. Far from being a voice crying in the wilderness, I find myself in good company.

The first great word of God was unspoken. It was his answer to Cain, son of Adam and Eve, whose answer when asked where was Abel, the brother he had slain, was a sarcastic:

“השומר אחי אנכי?” Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answer has reverberated down through the ages. “Yes, brother, you sure are!”

The Prophet Micah, in the Eighth Century Before the Common Era, cried, with exasperation in these words: “It has already been told you, O humanity, what is good and what the Lord doth require of thee: Only to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God.”

Five hundred years later, Rabbi Simon, is quoted in the Talmud as saying: The world is based on three things: on Torah, on the Divine service, and on deeds of loving kindness.

Our children still sing it: על התורה ועל העבודה ועל גמלות חסדים! Kindness!

In 1976, on this very bimah, when Beth Am celebrated the Bicentennial of the United States of America, a venerable 94 year old scholar, author of “The Story of Civilization,” Dr. Will Durant was asked what piece of wisdom he would select from a lifetime of study and reflection. He said: “If you insist on a brief answer, I say, ‘Kindness.’”

The Dalai Lama, when questioned answered, “My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness.”

Einstein said: Three things have given me new courage to face life cheerfully: Kindness, Beauty and Truth.”

Pearl Buck said: “I feel no need for any other faith than my faith in the kindness of

human beings.”

William Penn said “If there is any kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow being, let me do it now, and not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.”

Alfred Adler predicted: There is a law that man should love his neighbor as himself. In a few hundred years it should be as natural to mankind as breathing or the upright gait, but if he does not learn it HE MUST PERISH!

Lest we ultimately perish at our own hands I choose to speak of kindness today. I am, indeed, in good company.

A week ago I was in a dreadful situation of my own making. Twice a week I go for rehab to the Balance Disorders Institute, right up the street at 50 North La Cienega. I have a kind driver, Daniel Gleich, who drives me there and picks me up. Last Tuesday, September 4th, I went to the rehab without my cell phone. Ordinarily I would ask the staff there for a phone and phone Daniel to pick me up. However, I had left his cell number at home. I went out on La Cienega in the midday sun, fit only for mad Englishmen, hoping he would not wait for my call but would appear. I waited thirty minutes, bathed in perspiration and feeling very weak and having to lean against the one tree on the block.

I could have gone back up to the rehab and borrowed a phone but for two things: I had forgotten his cell number at home, and even if I had it, when I left the pavement he might have driven by, not seen me and gone on.

At that moment a young girl emerged from the building, a beautiful, smartly dressed African American career girl carrying a business-like portfolio and heading for her car. From half a block away she saw me, and apparently I looked pathetic, because she turned and walked swiftly to me.

“Are you in need of help?” she asked.

“Oh, am I!” I blurted out. “Can you lend me your cell phone, please.?”

“Gladly,” she said. I fumbled with this strange phone. She asked, “Can I dial the number for you?”

I gave her my home phone number, so that I could direct Margie to my desk on which Daniel’s number lay. Unfortunately, I learned later, Margie was in the shower at that moment and couldn’t pick up.

“Thank you,” I said. I’ll just have to wait here until my driver realizes I must surely die out here in the sun and come looking for me.”

“I’ll just stay here until he does,” she said. And so she did until he finally drove up, and she took her leave: “Take care, now.” She walked away, the first black angel I have ever known. Kindness? You bet.

In our folk literature we have a great story. There were two brothers who somehow grew apart. One lived in an urban area on the west side of a small hill. He was very successful at business and though he was married, was not blessed with children. The other brother lived on the east side of the hill, married and had eleven children, but had no mazal and eked out a living by growing fruits and vegetables. One year when his crop was bountiful he said to himself: “My brother does well, but he does not have children. Perhaps I could bring him cheer by bringing him some of my produce.”

So he filled a cart with his hard-won food, and under cover of a moonless night pushed and pulled his heavy cart up the hill and left the food on the other side.

His rich brother discovered the food on his door, and said, "Surely some angel has chosen to pleasure me with food."

He began to think of his poor brother. "I have so much and he is struggling with so little to raise his big family. Why don't I climb over the hill, leave a bag of coins on his doorstep for him to discover." And so he did.

One evening each one began thinking of his brother's needs. One filled his food cart and one filled his money sack and both climbed the hill. Just as they reached the top the moon broke through the clouds and they saw each other. For the first time in years they embraced and cried and said, "Why live apart? Let us move our families together and share the fruit of our labors."

Our legend says that hill was Mount Moriah, the very same hill where the Lord taught us what he wanted of us was not cruelty but kindness; the hill of which we read this morning where Abraham almost sacrificed his son until the angel of the Lord stopped him, crying out: "אל תשלה ידך אל נער" Lay not thy hand upon the child, neither do anything to him."

That tableau was the setting for a marvelous piece of news to be revealed to the human race, called "Kindness". A new kind of God was revealed to man. After countless eons of religions based on mortal fear of cruel and capricious gods who made man's days on earth a nightmare of superstition and terror, with those nine short words we learned of a god who wished us not to be cruel but to be kind; not to take life with meaningless sacrifices, but to spare life and preserve life. The stories we read today teach us that life is still worthless if it is not blessed with mercy and kindness.

Well you can't always notice that today. We are living in an age more cruel than the age of the cavemen or the Romans with their Coliseum or the Huns or the Cannibals or the Crusades.

Just look at the Pogroms and the bloody World Wars One and Two, and the Holocaust. Consider the atom bomb's wiping out of cities, and the potential for turning the whole earth deathly radioactive in the bigger bombs currently in or near the hands of people so blinded by hatred that they have no regard for the life of this planet. Consider Darfur right now.

Or if all that is a little too far away, consider that the major diet the television feeds us is a diet of bombings, and machine-gunnings and civilian murders whether on the news or in the unceasing barrage of murder-action films served us as entertainment, and in games - games for children. My God, who cares if one life, or two or two hundred are snuffed out before our very eyes when we can hardly tell if it is real or "entertainment"?

Who cares if in ever-popular boxing, someone is uppercut on the chin just right so as to cause a knock-out, brain hemorrhage or death? What of that wrestler who is near death, or if someone gets killed in a speedway race? That's entertainment."

The home is the arena where kindness should prevail, but in too many cases it does not. For many home is confinement to an invisible boxing ring, where husbands and wives are incredibly cruel and mean to each other, competitive, spiteful, tearing each other down with endlessly finding fault.

What is some of the dialogue? "You are just like your mother. She was a bitch and you are a bitch. Your father never made a living, so what can I expect from you, you loser? You are just like your uncle, Maxele goniff. You don't have a honest bone in you.

You are like your aunt Tootsie, the “Peritzeh” who put every dollar she made on her back and still looked like a tramp” And on and on.

I, who have faced thousands of beautiful and handsome and starry-eyes and hopeful couples, am crushed, heartbroken, disillusioned to hear their laundry list of complaints about one or both. I ask them, I ask myself: what went wrong? How can this happen? I am confronted by children, absolutely destroyed, beaten down with criticism, mental cruelty, even physical attack. I am heartsick to hear what some offsprings do to their parents, especially aged, sick, lonely parents. Whatever happened to a little kindness in the confines of the home, the haven of refuge from a hard outside world?

And what of physical cruelty? Beatings or worse for discipline.. How can one explain that mother who killed her two daughters, washed them, dressed them, and tossed them on the trash heap?

How many times must we read of fathers who killed their children and sometimes themselves to get even with a wife or lover they now hate?

Psychiatrist William McGrath reported, “Ninety percent of all mental illness could have been prevented or cured by ordinary kindness.” My message is, it starts at home

What do we make of cruelty to animals? Why do we need a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, an SPCA? Why do we have to see news of people who starve their animal pets to or near death? How do we explain the dog fighting which came to our attention with the indictment of Michael Vick, outstanding quarterback of the Atlanta Falcons, for sponsoring illegal dog-fighting, gambling, and permitting cruelty against animals on his premises, site of the Bad Newz Kennels and the burial ground of other pit-bulls killed in the fighting. Why? He was hugely successful, wealthy, admired...What motivates cock fighting, in which roosters are armed with sharp, steel fingernails to tear each other apart as cheering men gamble on the winner? What is it that allows humans to be inhumane to animals as well people? I can only come up with one answer: the lack of kindness. I like what the noted author, Jack London said: “Charity is the bone shared with the dog when you are just as hungry as the dog.” Animals understand cruelty and they understand kindness.

I always ask of my colleagues when we are discussing sermons: “Analyzing a problem is easy. Everybody already knows it as well as you, rabbis. What do you want them to do about it?”

I’ll tell you what I want, and I shall ask your indulgence if I begin it now. I am going to give you absolute permission to talk in schule. I want you to turn to the person sitting near you and looking that person in the eye, say, “Shalom Aleichem.

What is your name?

What do you do for a living or a homemaker?

Tell me about your family, if you are blessed with one, or if not, about your nearest relatives.

Come here often?

Tell me one thing, if any, that hurts you.

I’m sorry...or if nothing hurts I’m glad to hear it

I like you.

I like what you are wearing.

You have beautiful eyes.

I think you are a beautiful person.

I would like to know you better...even if you are a relative.

I love you.”

Now, why don't we do something like that all the time?

When you leave here, if you still remember what I am saying, find an amiable stranger and ask the same questions.

If you are (whispers) driving, and it takes a long time to get your car, be patient, don't get upset. Thank anybody who helps you get it.

When you try to get into the impossible traffic on La Cienega, be patient. Smile at the cars in your way, and if one, Hallevai, lets you get in line, wave and throw kisses.

On your way home, if you are in a line of cars and see somebody else stuck and trying to get in line, slow down and let him do it. Then, instead of that nasty finger, you may get a cheery wave of their hand, and a mouthed, “Thank you”.

Get the idea of where kindness starts? In the little ordinary frustrating situations we all confront constantly in an overcrowded society. And don't think I am asking you to be an angel, Heaven forbid...just a mensch.

At home, thank God for your food, and then thank the host or hostess and say the meal was wonderful...even if it wasn't. I give you permission for a little white lie.

Love your kids, if any, and at any age, and compliment them and say you love them.

Avoid arguments. Just don't talk about the weather, the elections, the traffic, business, the stock market, pains and aches, doctors, medications. Now you may ask, “So what's left to discuss?” Your hopes for next year, a good book you've read, a new friend you have made, and how grateful you are to be alive. Just be kind.

During the week, give the person with a sign pleading poverty at the intersection a buck. Maybe he or she is making as much as you by begging, but aren't you glad you don't have to do it.

Look for reasons to help other people, even if you have to go out of your way. - as that young girl did for me last week.

Volunteer for some community service if you can. I see volunteers at the hospital...manning information stands, carrying messages, bringing newspapers to patients and some are older than I am, but happy being of service, pleased at being kind.

What a condemnation of our society it is if all around there is emotional starvation and we cannot spare the time or the thoughtfulness to speak a kind word, perform a gracious act, pay a visit, drop a line, pay a compliment, Mark Twain once said he could live on a good compliment for two months. Remember that if you speak to me after services.

Kindness is not something reserved for the brilliant or the well educated person. Whoever has not learned kindness remains ignorant in my opinion, no matter how many diplomas hang on his or her wall.

I cannot imagine how a gruff and insensitive doctor can really heal me better than one who seems to care about me personally, and is extremely kind and gentle not only with my body but with my feelings. The kind teachers and professors I have had during the years of my schooling stand out in my memory. With many of them I established an ongoing relationship that they seemed to appreciate as much as I. My “Uncle George” George Montgomery was my Shakespeare director in High School. We kept in touch for years. When he was seventy he visited out here and we spent quality time together. As we parted he took my hand, and with a tear in his eye said, “Well Jacob. This is it. We will probably never meet again. But you were the kind of student who made me glad to

be a teacher.”

And from the other side of the desk, how careful teachers, and parents must be to be kind to children, for the lack of kindness on our part can bruise their delicate egos for the rest of their life. I know that I once liked and admired clever people. Now I like and admire good people.

Our Jewish tradition has given us so many vehicles for reacting with kindness. We made Mitzvot, which we regard as divine commandments out of such simple things as visiting the sick, burying the dead, marrying off the poor bride, making a free loan, and a host of others.

We have been given phrases to use in case we are not eloquent by nature. Everybody can say “Mazal Tov” to someone celebrating an important moment in life. Everybody can say “Yasher koah” to the person who has had an aliyah, read a maftir, given a talk or received a promotion on the job. Everybody can say, צאתך בשלום ובואך בשלום “Fur gezindt und kum gezindt” when a friend leaves on a trip; or say חדש, Trug ess in gezundt, “wear it in good health” when a friend shows off a new dress or suit. Our whole Jewish literature is saturated with instructions and opportunities for kindness.

What do we mean by opportunities? There are moments when our kind instincts are on automatic pilot, so to speak. We all read of one such incident this past year. It took place on the subway platform at Broadway and 137th Street in New York City, near where I went to the Seminary. A young man named Cameron Hollopeter was standing on the platform, waiting for the train when he had a seizure and fell onto the train tracks. Another man, a manual laborer named Wesley Autrey was waiting with his two children. When he saw Cameron fall, he gave his children to a woman standing nearby and jumped down on the tracks. He heard a train approaching so he threw himself over Cameron’s body to shield him in the pit between the tracks. Five cars passed over them just inches above Mr. Autrey’s head so close they left grease on his cap. He clearly had not stopped to think about it but acted instinctively. He saw a man in jeopardy and risked his life to save him. When New York Mayor Blumberg awarded him the highest medal the city can give, he said, “I am no hero. Anyone in my place would have done the same thing.” One would hope so.

This story struck me with extraordinary impact. Why? When I was eight years old I happened to be playing on the Philadelphia street car tracks...which we did in those trafficless days. I failed to pay attention to the clanging of a street car bell as a trolley was approaching me. A fourteen year old boy whom I did not know, leaped at me, shoved me off the tracks, but he lost a leg under the merciless steel wheels. My parents later told me he was Dan Connell, a good athlete, who had to spend the rest of his life with an artificial leg so that I might live. They told me that he, too, said, “I’m not a hero. I’m a good Catholic and I did what God would have wanted me to do.”

I pray no one here will ever be so tested. All I ask is that we hear the voice of the angel of the Lord demanding of us, “Be kind, be kind, to your spouse, to your child, to your coworkers in the workplace, to friends and to strangers, because if humanity does not learn to practice kindness it will destroy itself.

I relied on the wise teachings of many famous persons in bolstering my case. I should like to give the last word to Anne Franke, whose kindness even Hitler could not blot out. She wrote:

“I keep my ideals because in spite of every thing I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

And that is all I ask of you and myself this year.

AMEN