

Rosh Hashanah 5778

Rabbi Beth Nichols

### Building the World with Kindness

As many of you know, I spent most of my childhood in Massachusetts. And yes, I managed to escape without a Boston accent, with the exception of a few words and phrases. In fact, I am often told (or teased) that my pronunciation makes me sound as if I come from the Midwest, an area of the country in which I have, in fact, never lived.

I cannot explain my unique blend of pronunciations, but I do think I would like living in the Midwest because of the phenomenon known as “Midwestern Nice:” the regional tendency for people to be more pleasant to one another – friends and strangers alike. I think I would fit right in because I like saying good morning as I hold the door for the person coming into the coffee shop, walking down the street and smiling when I make eye contact with a stranger, and calling out “have a good day” to someone as they get off the elevator. I get a jolt of satisfaction when a person looks back, surprised at my greeting, nods their head in acknowledgement, or returns my smile with an even bigger one. Sometimes I even give myself the challenge of seeing if I can elicit a positive reaction from someone who looks particularly grumpy or beleaguered. These brief moments of kindness are not revolutionary – no societal ills are eradicated by my smile or greeting. Nonetheless, I believe these moments of kindness have power and potential.

When we carry the Torah around the sanctuary we sing, “*Al shlosha d’varim haolam omed...* The world stands on three things: on Torah, on worship, and on *gemilut chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness. When I teach this famous rabbinic saying to our b’nei mitzvah students, I use a three-legged stool with a world painted on the seat, to illustrate that without every one of the legs, the stool will simply not stand up. Using this same imagery to evaluate our society today, we see that the world is tilting dangerously. The leg of *gemilut chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness, is splintered and weakened; the structural integrity of the world is compromised. Individual success wins out over communal growth, differences of opinion grow to become personal attacks, strangers face mistrust rather than kindness...

Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, eminent biologist Thomas Huxley, a fierce defender of evolution, delivered a lecture entitled “Evolution and Ethics.” His thesis was essentially that evolution, while scientifically sound, should not serve as a moral compass for life. In fact the pursuit of a virtuous life will often lead a person to act in direct opposition to the theories of natural selection. Goodness or kindness will direct us, according to Huxley, “not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive.”<sup>1</sup> The desire and ability to live in this way is part of what defines our humanity. But I fear that too often, in the fast-paced, competitive, fractured society of today, survival of the fittest steers human behavior more than kindness.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. David Barash. “Kindness in an Unkind World.” *Psychology Today*, 2014.

According to the ancient rabbis, kindness is not only part of what it means to be human, but it is an essential quality of being a Jew. In the Talmud, the rabbis list kindness as one of the three traits that characterize the Jewish people: “They are compassionate, they are humble, and they perform acts of lovingkindness.”<sup>2</sup> This Talmudic text suggests that a person’s Jewish identity can be called into question not because of a lack of piety or ritual observance, as one might expect, but because of a person’s character. I appreciate the implication of this statement. While I could never support an assertion that “Real Jews keep kosher,” or “Real Jews wear yarmulkes,” I think I can get behind the statement, “Real Jews are kind.”

While it might seem unnecessary, I have yet to explain what the performance of *gemilut chasadim* actually entails. Kindness may appear to be a simple concept, one taught to even the youngest of children, but the ancient rabbis engaged in an intense debate about the meaning of *gemilut chasadim*. While they universally agreed that we are commanded to engage in acts of lovingkindness, they disagreed about how to fulfill the commandment. On one side of the debate is a belief that *gemilut chasadim* is a general behavioral trait, an overarching virtue that can be displayed through a multitude of behaviors and attitudes. On the other side of the debate is a claim that *gemilut chasadim* references a specific list of actions; one can fulfill this commandment only by performing a limited set of behaviors.

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<sup>2</sup> Yevamot 79a

Those who argue for a list claim that people need the guidance of concrete acts as encouragement, while those who argue that kindness is a general virtue believe that a list would too easily allow people to limit the extent of their kindness and remove the need to actively seek out opportunities to show kindness.

I fall on the side of the generalists, not wanting to limit the myriad of ways we can practice *gemilut chasadim*. I am inspired by the possibility of perpetually discovering new ways to show lovingkindness. Rabbi Yochanan taught, “Be always like a helmsman, on the lookout for good deeds.”<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Eugene Borowitz concretizes Rabbi Yochanan’s poetic imagery when he describes “other-directedness” as a foundational understanding in Judaism.<sup>4</sup> We humans are not solitary creatures; we live in a network of relationships that call us to look outside of ourselves and consider the needs of others.

There are innumerable ways for us to be kind, and most of these ways do not require all that much from us. The effect of kindness far outweighs its cost. Anne Frank, writing from the attic in March of 1944, wrote, “You can always, always, always give something, even if it is only kindness. Give, give again, don’t lose courage. Keep it up and go on giving. No one has ever become poor from giving.” In the darkest of times, Anne Frank understood the far-reaching impact of an act of kindness.

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<sup>3</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 21:5

<sup>4</sup> *The Jewish Moral Virtues*

At the end of her comment, she also demonstrates her understanding that kindness doesn't have to be expensive. In fact, the rabbis are careful to make the distinction between *tzedakah* and *gemilut chasadim*. While some types of *tzedakah* are examples of *gemilut chasadim*, *gemilut chasadim* has a broader reach in three ways: Acts of kindness can be done for both the rich and poor, while *tzedakah* is meant for the poor. Kindness can be shown to both the living and the dead, while *tzedakah* is given to the living. And kindness can be done with money or action, while *tzedakah* can only be done with money.<sup>5</sup>

In no way are the rabbis discounting the importance of *tzedakah*. After all, the term is derived from the word for righteousness or justice. Giving *tzedakah* restores justice in the world. What the rabbis are doing here is celebrating the role of *gemilut chasadim* in holding up the world. Rabbi Borowitz taught that “*gemilut chasadim* is about relationships and about the give and take that defines and nurtures them.”<sup>6</sup> Small acts of kindness bring people together because of their simplicity. They are not done to bring justice, they are not offered as a reward, they are not done out of fear, they are not done for recognition. Rather, acts of kindness are done simply out of love. Maimonides defines *chesed* as “the practice of benevolence toward one who has no entitlement to what he or she receives.”<sup>7</sup> A century earlier, Solomon ibn Gabirol urges people to: “act with kindness both with him who deserves it and with him who deserves it not. For if he is deserving, you bestow it in its proper place; and if he is not deserving, you will deserve it, for God commanded humanity to do good and practice kindness.”

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<sup>5</sup> NEED CITATION

<sup>6</sup> *Jewish Moral Virtues*.

<sup>7</sup> *Jewish Ethical Values*.

We are obligated to act with kindness because on this day of Rosh Hashanah, when we celebrate the Creation of the world, we are reminded that we ourselves were created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. With the knowledge of this gift, we are meant to live our lives in imitation of God. Over the next ten days we will hear chanted over and over again the thirteen attributes of God. Two of those thirteen attributes include the word *chesed*, kindness, and therefore, by performing acts of lovingkindness we demonstrate gratitude for having been created in God's own image.

Jewish tradition stresses that *gemilut chasadim* is done out of love, and not for recognition or reward. But the authors of Jewish tradition did not yet know of the scientific method and the research results of countless studies. They didn't know that when we are kind to another person, our brain's pleasure centers light up as if we were the receiver rather than the giver.<sup>8</sup> They didn't know that the regular performance of acts of kindness increases positive moods and life satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> They didn't know kindness boosts serotonin, produces endorphins, decreases stress hormones, and slows down aging.<sup>10</sup> Being kind is good for our souls and our bodies.

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<sup>8</sup> Emory University.

<sup>9</sup> Case Western and University of British Columbia.

<sup>10</sup> Random Acts of Kindness website.

Artist Hanan Harchol created an animated short film exploring kindness through an imagined conversation between the artist and his father. The conversation focuses in on the interplay of kindness and fear. The father argues that success and progress are often stymied by fear. He says in the film, “Fear just shuts everything down. Fear and compassion don’t mix. Fear and creativity don’t mix. Fear just makes you afraid.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, kindness fosters understanding and collaboration, leaving open the possibility that more than one person, or more than one side can benefit and grow. “Kindness, says Hanan Harchol, “is the antidote to fear.”<sup>12</sup>

Harchol’s discussion of fear struck a chord with me. We live in a world where fear prevails, where fear is our default. Our urge to shield ourselves and our children from hurt has caused us to enter new situations and relationships with fear. And right alongside fear is mistrust, judgment and resistance to change. The value of *gemilut chasadim* invites us to lead with kindness. To both literally and metaphorically approach new situations and people with an open hand and heart. Psalm 89 proclaims, “*Olam chesed y’baneh*, the world will be built with lovingkindness.” The possibility of building up our world is worth the risk of offering kindness and not receiving it in return. Little by little, acts of kindness can change the very nature of the way people interact with one another.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.hananharchol.com/watch-kindess>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.hananharchol.com/watch-kindess>

According to one rabbinic legend, a single act of kindness turned a gladiator into a rabbi. Simon was an Israelite, but had been trained from a young age to be a Roman gladiator fighting in arenas full of cheering spectators. His strength and rage were renowned and people on the street regularly steered away from him in fear. Everyone, but Rabbi Yochanan. One day, Rabbi Yochanan and Simon stepped onto opposite ends of a narrow bridge over a rushing stream. Rabbi Yochanan was rushing to his meet with his students and Simon was hurrying to get to a fight. At the center of the bridge Simon stood tall and scowled, assuming that Yochanan would shrink in fear. But instead, Yochanan put out his hand in greeting, called Simon his brother and expressed concern for his welfare in the approaching fight. And, according to legend, it was these simple gestures of kindness that changed Simon's life forever. So moved by the rabbi's caring words, Simon put down his armor and went to study Torah, achieving a new kind of fame as the rabbi known as Reish Lakish.

The origin story of this revered rabbinic scholar seems more fantasy than truth, but it leaves me with hope. Hope that if we can strengthen the acts of lovingkindness that help to hold up the world, we can turn hatred into love, fear into trust, gladiators into students of Torah.

In the same diary entry that I quoted earlier, Anne Frank declared, "How lovely to think that no one need wait a moment before making the world better. We can start now slowly changing the world!" May this year of 5778 be a year filled with *gemilut chasadim*, acts of loving kindness.