

The Road To Kindness
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LA traffic! Enough said, right? I mean, traffic is so bad here that SNL made a whole skit called the Californians, which makes fun of the fact that Angelinos add “the” in front of every freeway and discuss all the possible ways to get from point A to point B. I am no stranger to bad traffic. Looking at the list of the top 10 cities with the worst traffic, I have lived in the 6th, 7th and 8th worst cities for traffic according to the recent study. #6: Los Angeles, #7: The Bay Area, and #8 the DC area. One of the things I have learned during my time in these “bad traffic” cities is the way traffic brings out the worst behaviors in people, including myself. Unkind drivers have the power to negatively affect our morning, our afternoons, and even longer periods of time.

Our world can be a cruel place, filled with people that treat us like objects on the road instead of human beings. Traffic prevents us from going as fast as we would like, often leaving us feeling depressed, angry and disconnected. One of my favorite television shows to watch as a child, Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood, paints an alternative and kinder vision for the world. Over the course of a few episodes that aired in the mid 90s, Mr. Rogers teaches about the difference between fast...and slow (say it fast and slow). Ultimately, he suggests there is value in slow, intentional acts. He exemplifies this point over the course of his show’s 30 year run. I can only imagine how Mr. Rogers might approach LA traffic...What would it look like to harness

the power of kindness, both on the road and in the rest of our lives? I believe genuine acts of kindness have the power to unlock the depths of Torah, our relationships with people, and even the divine.

When I first arrived at KI, I was fortunate enough to be graced by a nugget of wisdom from our Rabbi Emeritus, Rabbi Reuben. He teaches, “Never honk in the Palisades, unless it is to avoid an accident.” Our rabbi’s sage advice is actually based on the meaning of kindness as developed by the Jewish tradition. Often, we perceive kindness as polite and well-mannered behavior. In fact, the modern Hebrew term for kindness, *adivut*, describes exactly that. The biblical term, *hessed*, however, the basis of the Jewish understanding of kindness, is different. *Hessed* is difficult to translate into English, because it really has no equivalency in our language. English versions usually try to represent it with such words as “loving-kindness,” “mercy,” “steadfast love,” and sometimes “loyalty,” but the complete meaning of the word cannot be conveyed without an explanation. The word is used in Torah only in cases where there is some recognized tie between the parties. It is not used to connote kindness in general, and would not be used to describe the popular notion of “random acts of kindness.” The word *hessed*, more than any other word, reflects the attitude which both parties in a relationship ought to maintain towards each other.

Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow writes, “Acts of *hessed* are the active representation of a covenant among people, a social contract. This is not about simply getting a request in the mail for funds and writing a check, or bringing a can of soup to a box at your JCC or synagogue. It is

not even about showing up once a year at the homeless shelter or soup kitchen or writing letters to Congress to affect social policies. Those are truly important, relevant acts, but they fail to engage people in relationships of understanding. It is when we become engaged with real people and communities on the other end of our giving—whether of time or resources— that we realize the covenantal aspect of *hessed*.” We should all avoid honking in the Palisades, not to be “nice” but because we want to honor and deepen our covenantal relationship with each other.¹

Perhaps one of the most well known verses of Torah to exemplify the covenantal notion of kindness is found in Leviticus Chapter 19, וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ. We usually translate this as, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” You may recognize the first word from a daily prayer that comes from Deuteronomy, which we chanted together this morning. *V’ahavta et Adonai Elohecha* (actually chant this)...you shall love Adonai Your God. Adults and children alike have asked, how can love be commanded? One cannot be forced to emote love towards anyone, especially a higher power! Jacob Milgrom concurs, teaching in his well known commentary on Leviticus, “The verb “love” signifies not only an emotion or attitude, but also deeds. This is especially true in Deuteronomy, which speaks of covenantal love. The alien is loved by providing him with food and shelter. God is loved by observing his commandments. God in turn loves Israel by subduing its enemies.²

¹ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/acts-of-loving-kindness/>

² Leviticus, 234, Milgrom

A story in the Talmud illustrates just how central this notion of kindness is in Torah. There was an incident involving a non Jew who came before Shammai and said to Shammai: Convert me on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot. Shammai pushed him away with the builder's cubit in his hand. The same non Jew came before Hillel. He converted him and said to him: That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go and study!³ There is a lot to unpack in this story. Hillel's one sentence summary of what the Torah teaches is indeed a reframing of our verse from Leviticus, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Everything else in the Torah, he says, is פירושה, interpretation of this verse. I wholeheartedly agree. Most every Torah portion can be understood to have something to do with kindness, i.e. the way we relate to ourselves, to others, and to the divine.

In writing this sermon, I realized the very first Torah portion, where God clothes Adam and Eve and the final one, where God buried Moses, each exemplify acts of kindness. Even in our Torah portion today, the Binding of Isaac, we read, "Take your son, your favored one, אֲשֶׁר-אָהַבְתָּ, the one you love." There is that word again, *vahavta*, which we have already seen means more than just the emotional love but also deeds of kindness.

³ Talmud Bavli, Shabbat, 31a:6

To be kind starts with one's self. In his book called "The Power of Kindness" Piero Ferrucci concludes by saying, "There is no choice between being kind to others and being kind to ourselves. It is the same thing."⁴ He boils kindness down to the interplay of 19 qualities. A few of these qualities include warmth, trust, patience, loyalty, mindfulness, generosity, and gratitude. As I read each chapter, I realized that each of these qualities is as much about our actions towards others as they are about the way we act towards ourselves.

One of the qualities that seems most pertinent to our relational definition of kindness is patience. Ferrucci writes, "Patience is the skill of understanding and respecting your own rhythms and those of others"⁵ Personally, this resonates with me deeply as an educator. In his book, "The Courage To Teach" Parker Palmer writes, "Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique, good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher."⁶ In other words, if we as teachers are going to be patient with our students, we need to cultivate that first for ourselves. Doing so enables educators to see how each child has their own way of learning and to discern the learning rhythms of their students. When a child does not learn in the way we hope or expect them to, we cannot push them to speed up or change who they are. All this accomplishes is to push them away, and discourage them from wanting to learn with us. A patient teacher is a kind teacher.

⁴ The Power of Kindness, 293, Ferrucci

⁵ The Power of Kindness, 161, Ferrucci

⁶ The Courage To Teach, 10, Palmer

Let us revisit the story of Hillel and Shamai as they are approached by a non Jewish student who wants to learn Torah on one foot. After Shamai uses a builder's cubit to shoo him away, Hillel not only figures out what this student needs but agrees to teach him the whole Torah while he stands on one foot. Peculiar as it may sound, Hillel's patience is what enables him to connect with this student. Following the incident, the conversion student says, "Shammai's impatience sought to drive me from the world; Hillel's patience brought me beneath the wings of the Divine Presence."⁷ Patience, a virtue of kindness, creates a holy possibility. That is, for us to uncover our own soul and provide the sustenance that it needs. Only then, can we move forward slowly, ready to do the same for someone else's soul.

If we slow down and give ourselves the opportunity to act kindly, we are more likely to be able to truly meet and get to know each other. 20th century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, presents the notion of I-It and I-Thou relationships. An I-It relationship, he explains, means that one person treats the other as a thing. In such an interaction, the I appears as an ego focussed only on the benefits to themselves. Anyone can say or do something "nice" to someone. But "niceness" does not enable us to enter into deep relationships. Niceness is about impressing someone, lifting up the I. Take, for instance, your waiter at a restaurant. They may smile and ask you how you are doing and you may respond back. Likely, the interaction, though, does not connect to your soul and most certainly not with the soul of the other. Kindness, however, is synonymous with an I Thou relationship. We may do an act of helpfulness or generosity in the context of a relationship where we try to better understand the other, one

⁷ Shabbat 31a:9

where our soul becomes tied up with theirs. Kindness is not about lifting up the I or the you, but rather, building and strengthening the relationship between the two. When we feel our soul is connected to the soul of another, we enter more and more into the realm of kindness. Buber concludes: when the soul of the I touches the soul of the you, one touches a spark of the divine.

During the High Holy Days we recite *Unetaneh Tokef*, reminding ourselves of the fragility and shortness of human life. It begins “*Untaneh tokef k’dushat hayom*. Let us announce the power, the holiness of this day” and finishes with “*v’yikon b’chesed kisecha*, in kindness, your throne will be established.” Jewish tradition reminds us that in the face of uncertainty, we have the power to make our time here worthwhile through the power of kindness. Here are some tangible ways we can do so:

1. Kindness is relational. In order to set ourselves up for success, we need to seek relational, rather than transactional, interactions with others. In Judaism, this type of interaction stems from the notion of *brit*, covenant.
2. Start from within: To be kind to others, you must first be kind to yourself. Find ways to act kindly to yourself such as being patient with your own rhythm of life.
3. Approach others slowly, with actions that seek understanding, the I thou way. Not ways that use others to elevate your ego.
4. Finally, go and study! A life of Torah promotes a life of kindness. Each year, we can find new ways to interpret and apply the Torah’s wisdom to our own lives.

After watching Mr. Rogers Neighborhood every morning for many years as a child, I truly felt we had a relationship, and it turns out I was not alone. As an adult, when I watched the

documentary “Won’t You Be My Neighbor”, I cried. Mr. Rogers worked hard to help each child see how they themselves are connected to others. He knew that genuine kindness did not happen in a vacuum. As a minister himself, he lived and preached the bible’s imperative to “Love Your Neighbor as Yourself.” After all, the premise of the show was teaching kids how to be a good neighbor. Hard to believe this happened to me this morning. After first leaving my tallit at home and needing to return home, I then got to my freeway onramp only to find out it was closed. With all of my detours, I was losing 15 minutes of time and I was feeling rushed, irritable, a little angry. As I approached the intersection of Pico and I Bundy, I looked up and saw a billboard with a picture of Mr. Roger’s reading, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” I instantly felt at ease. I’ll leave you to contemplate his famous words. “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.”

Kein Yehi Ratzon. May this be our will. Shana Tova.