A couple of weeks ago, I read a Facebook post in which a friend shared that she had spent the night at the Emergency Room with her daughter because of a health issue. Her post wasn’t about her daughter (who ended up fine), but rather about her experience as a recipient of a random act of kindness in what was otherwise a very tense evening for her family. While waiting, her other child, a baby, had an accident, of the sort that calls for a full change of clothes, which she had not brought along. Another woman, in the Emergency Room for her own reasons, noticed this, and gave her a full change of clothes. As she did, she said, we have all been in this situation. This story elicited many likes and many comments admiring the kindness of this stranger. I felt similarly, and could easily imagine myself in a similar situation, feeling extremely grateful for the random act of kindness that brought a bit of relief to an otherwise difficult situation. But after a moment I paused and I asked myself, what does it say about our society that a story about a person who expressed empathy and helped another person, is cause for such commotion and excitement? What does it mean when a random act of kindness is celebrated as a unique and rare experience?

The day after reading that post, I was at Hebrew College in Newton, and outside one of the offices I saw a small bucket with a sign that said: random acts of kindness, take candy and do something sweet for someone else. I thought: that’s cute. But when I put my hand in to take a piece of candy, the bucket was empty… when the first wave of disappointment passed, I thought: wait - does that mean that I don’t need to do a random act of kindness, I don’t have to do something sweet for someone else?

I have been thinking about compassion and kindness a lot lately. As I shared last night, for these High Holidays I am inviting you to join me in exploring what it might mean for us to live a life of חֶסֶד. Exploring the implications
of turning towards ourselves, our friends and family with חֶסֶד. Reflecting on the ways in which חֶסֶד is and could further become the foundation of our community.

Today and tomorrow we will delve into the biblical phrase Olam Hesed Yibane, the world is built on love, and explore its implications for the ways we interact within our own community. On Yom Kippur we will explore the resonance of this phrase in the context of our ongoing commitments to social justice, to healing the world and to the Jewish People.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Emeritus Chief Rabbi of the UK, shares the following story in one of his divrei torah: “In 1966 an eleven-year-old black boy moved with his parents and family to a white neighbourhood in Washington. Sitting with his two brothers and two sisters on the front step of the house, he waited to see how they would be greeted. They were not. Passers-by turned to look at them but no one gave them a smile or even a glance of recognition. All the fearful stories he had heard about how whites treated blacks seemed to be coming true. Years later, writing about those first days in their new home, he says, “I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here . . .”

As he was thinking those thoughts, a white woman coming home from work passed by on the other side of the road. She turned to the children and with a broad smile said, “Welcome!” Disappearing into the house, she emerged minutes later with a tray laden with drinks and cream-cheese and jelly sandwiches which she brought over to the children, making them feel at home. That moment – the young man later wrote – changed his life. It gave him a sense of belonging where there was none before (…).

Over the years, he learned to admire much about the woman across the street, but it was that first spontaneous act of greeting that became, for him, a definitive memory. It broke down a wall of separation and turned strangers into friends.

The young man, Stephen Carter, eventually became a law professor at Yale and wrote a book about what he learned that day. He called it Civility. The name of the woman, he tells us, was Sara Kestenbaum, and she died all too young. He adds that it was no coincidence that she was a religious Jew. “In the Jewish tradition,” he notes, such
civility is called “hesed – the doing of acts of kindness – which is in turn derived from the understanding that human beings are made in the image of God.” Civility, he adds, “may itself be seen as part of hesed: it does indeed require kindnesses toward our fellow citizens, including the ones who are strangers, and even when it is hard.” To this day, he adds, “I can close my eyes and feel on my tongue the smooth, slick sweetness of the cream cheese and jelly sandwiches that I gobbled on that summer afternoon when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever.”

Here is another story, shared by Reb Zalman Shachter-Shalomi: “Turgenev tells a great story about how he walks across a bridge and meets a beggar begging. He reaches into his pocket for a coin but find he does not have a cent to give. So he turns to the man and says, ‘I am so sorry, brother, I do not have anything to give you’. ‘You have just given me something’ the man replies. ‘You called me brother’. In speaking about this story, Reb Zalman taught that hesed rests first and foremost in truly seeing another.

The Rabbis in the Talmud teaches us that the Torah begins and ends with acts of hesed:

ра"ש ר' שמולא: 
תורהihilת הגלות חסדיו סופה חסד

Rabbi Samlai taught:
The Torah begins with an act of kindness and ends with an act of kindness.

It begins with an act of kindness, as it is written: “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21).
And it ends with an act of kindness, as it is written: “And he buried him in the valley in the

1 http://rabbisacks.org/kindness-strangers-chayei-sarah-5775/
2 Jewish with feeling, a guide to Meaningful Jewish Practice, Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi with Joel Segal, page 248

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Our active response of being alive
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman
Rosh Hashanah First Day 5780
What Rabbi Samlai teaches us is that the whole Torah is framed and constructed around *hesed* and that *hesed* is mode in which God holds human life from the beginning to the end. The first act of *hesed* is clothing the naked baby, and last act of *hesed* is burying the dead.

In this same chapter of the Talmud, just a couple of paragraphs before, the rabbis engage with the concept of *hesed* as more than just a divine characteristic. What are the implications, they ask, of the concept of *hesed* on humans who are trying to emulate the holy, blessed One?

Rabbi Ḫama, son of Rabbi Ḫanina, says:
What is the meaning of the verse: “follow Adonai your God,” . . . .
Is it possible for a mortal to follow the Divine Presence?
And the response is:

אלא לאלים להלך אחוה שכניה? . . . .
One should follow the attributes of the holy, blessed One.

The text then illustrates this with examples of God’s actions that we should imitate in order to follow in God’s path:

Just as God clothes the naked, (clothing Adam and Eve), so too, should you clothe the naked.
Just as God visits the sick (visiting Abraham after his circumcision), so too, should you visit the sick.
Just as God comforts mourners, (comforting Isaac after Abraham’s death), so too, should you comfort mourners.

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Just as God buried the dead, (burying Moses) so too, should you bury the dead.

The four examples presented as the core of following God’s path are rooted in empathy and in our capacity to see each other. Our capacity to see a naked person, to understand and respond to this basic need. To see a sick person and be present for their pain, to comfort and be present for someone who has suffered a loss, and to give a person their final rest on this earth.

I have no doubt that you would all agree that being kind to people, being present and compassionate, and taking care of those in need are important qualities, important both to learn about and to practice.

I am also confident that you would mostly agree that such attitudes and ways of behavior are part of our responsibilities as citizens of the world, as part of the communities we belong to, and hopefully also as part of THIS, our TBZ community.

And I could end my words now, and tell you, this is how we build a world from love. The way to respond to hatred, and pain and desperation and helpless-ness and to all the hard and bleak reality that surrounds us, is by being kind to each other. And you would all go home and say, Rav Claudia said the usual things about being more compassionate and doing more acts of loving kindness and hopefully we will all do our best to do as many random acts of kindness. I trust that you are mostly doing this even without my sermon. Most of us probably do more such acts of kindness on days when we have the time and patience and less on the days we are rushing into life and deadlines and crazy multitasking. More on the days that we feel inspired and less on

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Sotah 14a

גכדרות המלביש עלומים: דכתיב (בראשית ג, כא) יעשנה깥לאים ו荆州ות etiquוהלimest והשם עשה אתים לבושו. הקב"ה ביברו הלימד(בראשית ח, כא) ויאמר לאו איבאולי tomarח אתים לבושו. הקב"ה יינוהו אלים דכתיב (בראשית כד, כא) ואתים אשרו איברה霉素 אליהם אתים יינוהו ואתים לבושו. הקב"ה כבר ממליך דכתיב (דברים לד, כא) ויבאサポート אתים לבושו אתים לבושו.

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days we are feeling down and upset, more when it doesn’t disturb our sense of privacy and less when what is expected from us is to go out of our comfort zone.

I would like to take a few moments to reflect on the phrase “random acts of kindness” and its social implications. Identifying these acts as random seems to imply that they come out of nowhere, that they are given freely and for no reason except to be kind. When we speak about acts of kindness as random, it suggests that these acts are not regular or part of an intentional framework. Such random acts are welcome and wonderful and serve as an important balance to the sense of alienation that is often present in our public spaces. However, I want to invite and encourage us to think about hesed, kindness, loving-kindness, or compassion as a practice. To treat kindness not as something random in our lives, but rather as a Way of Life. To take hesed as the framework for our lives and our social interactions. To have hesed serve as the infrastructure of our community, similar to the way R Simlai saw it framing Torah. I would like us to imagine and practice hesed as the active, ongoing response to being alive.

Setting care for others as the foundation of our life will not be simple and will stretch some of the boundaries of our culture and the ways that we live. The values of individualism and privacy run deep in our society. More and more often I am running into a tension between those values and setting care for the other at the center. Sometimes that caring may conflict with privacy.

Knocking on someone's door with chicken soup, showing up unannounced to wish someone refuah shlema (a speedy recovery) or to comfort them after a loss, or because we heard they are going through something hard, often clashes with our sense of privacy.

Sadly, in today's text-only communication world, even just calling unannounced might seem a violation of privacy.

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Inviting someone who we don't know well to our shabbat or pesach table can make us uncomfortable, raising questions like - what if the person doesn't fit in with the rest of my guests?

Asking to bring meals to a family that had a loss or to a couple that just had a baby, might seem like too much of an imposition.

Following up with someone we haven't seen at shul for a while, but we are not close to, may seem invasive.

It is hard. We value boundaries and at the same time this notion of hesed asks us to live a life where we are generously present for others, to give ourselves to others and to be open to receive from others in ways that might feel frightening and somehow bounder-less.

Reb Zalman explains the concept of Gemilut hesed in the following way: “Gemilut is the word that turns individual acts of hesed into an entire network. It derives from the same hebrew word as the phrase yachas gomlin, meaning a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity. Gemilut is the activity of mutuality and reciprocity. Gemilut is the activity that creates the I-Thou relationship that Martin Buber describes. You sustain me and I sustain you. Or: you act toward me in hesed, I do the same to the next person I meet, and it will come around to you again. In this way gemilut chasadim is woven throughout the fabric of society. Such a vision helps us understand why the rabbis saw gemilut chasadim as one of the three pillars of existence.”

I want to go back to the text I quoted earlier, the one text teaches that we follow God’s ways by clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting the mourner and burying the dead.

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4 “Jewish with Feeling - a guide to Meaningful Jewish Practice”, Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi with Joel Segal, page 248
Rabbi Shai Held, a teacher in New York in his Eli Talk (those are like TED talks for Jewish ideas) invites us to look closely at this list (clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting the mourner and burying the dead.) Quoting him: “You’ll see something striking. Some of us, no doubt are frightened by all of these situations. And all of us, I suspect, at least some of the times, are frightened by some of them. Overwhelmed by fear, we are tempted to run away. Judaism comes along and says if you want to be religious if you want to serve God, if you want to be an heir of the Jewish tradition, learn to run towards the very places that you are tempted to run away from. Learn to see those, others look past. That is what Judaism asks of us. Fear is very hard, we have to push ourselves and be kind to ourselves at the very same time”. Rabbi Held adds: “Being present with people in times of pain is what the sages called walking on God’s ways. This is Godliness. To take Judaism seriously is to grow in compassion”.5

What might this look like?

In one’s personal life, it could mean to prioritize and intentionally make time during the week for acts of hesed. To regularly ask ourselves, is there someone that needs support, to call them, to send a note and visit, to show up for them. Maybe adding an act of hesed to our daily, or weekly routine. Making that call, visiting the person that is sick.

Volunteering periodically and teaching our children, from a young age, that caring for others and showing up, is a priority and a regular part of our life, not just a nice gesture, even when it might mean making sacrifices and giving up something.

At TBZ, it means, strengthening our strong community of Hesed, our network of volunteers for visiting the sick, giving rides, bringing meals and caring for those who need the support.

During shabbat services, reaching out to people we see at services, that don’t know other people, that are sitting at kiddush alone. Being intentional about it.

5 Rabbi Shai Held, Eli Talk https://elitalks.org/compassion-and-heart-jewish-spirituality
Opening our homes for people for shabbat and holidays, when asked to and even before we are asked to. Perhaps create a system for our community to host shabbat meals and for people who are looking to be hosted to know they can count on that. To ensure shiva minyanim for our mourners, not only for those people we have a personal relationship with, but for all members of our shul. Making sure that mourners are being supported also beyond the minyan with things such as food, and providing community through their formal mourning period and beyond.

Supporting families who have new babies, with meals and visits to make their new stage of life less overwhelming.

To be aware and mindful of those who are with us at TBZ. To be intentional about noticing and asking how people are doing, noticing when people are not here, and checking in with them, especially with the elderly in our community. Expanding the circles of connection in our community to people of different ages, and to people with whom we often would not connect.

Our community is at its strongest when we are able to care for one another in times of need.

Our community is at its strongest when we delight in each other's simchas.

Our community is at its strongest when we see each other, when we care for each other, when we sustain each other with hesed. When we look at each other, even when uncomfortable and see each other as brother and sister.

When we welcome someone who might feel excluded, and by just smiling and saying welcome we might change their entire experience.

We are at our best when hesed is integral to everything we do, and not just a random act, not an extracurricular activity.

It is my vision, my hope, my charge for our community for this year to go deeper in our practice of hesed, to ask ourselves where we can push our boundaries, what are we are doing great as a community of hesed, and what are the potentials we are not
fulfilling? How can we grow in compassion together, as individuals, as a community. How can *hesed* be our active, daily response to being alive.

*Olam hesed Yibane*, “The world is built from love”: The word *Yibane*, ‘built’ suggests that the world of kindness on earth is not created in a single moment, rather it is built like one builds a house, brick by brick, phone call by phone call, visit by visit, action by action, person by person, day by day, smile by smile.

I have a small present for you, that I hope will remind you that every one of us, is a builder with a role in building this world of *hesed*. We made magnets to put on your refrigerator door, with the words *Olam Hesed Yibane*. My hope is that in the morning, when you open the refrigerator to get breakfast, or a glass of water, you will see this magnet and it will remind you to walk that day in the ways of God, with God, as a builder of love, as a practitioner of *hesed*.

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As we pass the magnets around, I want to give credit for this idea to Rabbi Andy Vogel from Temple Sinai, as he is also speaking on the topic of *Olam hesed Yibane* this morning and as we were sharing ideas, he came up with the idea of the magnets. Temple Sinai members are also getting their magnets today, so looks like Beacon Street is ready to build this world with love.