

What Is Hateful To You, Do Not Do To Another, Part 1: Won't you be my Neighbor?

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Erev Rosh HaShanah – September 9, 2018

I'm ambivalent about the internet. Not because the internet is inherently good or bad, it's not, it's really only a tool. And like any tool, it can be used to create, or used to destroy, it all depends on the person who is using it.

For those of you who are on Facebook, you know that I am a prolific poster, particularly at 5 in the morning, or 10 o'clock at night. However, you should know, that for every thing I post, there is a lot of thought that goes into whether or not I should hit the return key.

Before I post something I ask myself "who is going to be reading this?", "what will people's reaction be to what I wrote, or the article I'm posting?" I wonder if it will simply anger or reinforce someone's beliefs, or will it actually prompt them to think, or reconsider something they hadn't thought deeply about before. Or will it provoke or inspire them to act in some particular way?

I love that the internet provides me with a way to keep track of my friends who live far away, to make them feel like they're still living near by. I delight in seeing photos of their families, reading updates about their lives.

I love that I can touch base with congregants who might not be able to come to services as often as they would like, but who feel more connected to me or the temple because they can check out what's going on through our Facebook pages.

But all too often, I am appalled by the internet and social media, instead of drawing people closer, it puts up a wall, creating an atmosphere of "us" vs. "them." I continue to be shocked at the hostility people use when speaking to each other on a screen, when I know that's not what they would say or do if they were face to face with the person they are disagreeing with.

And I refuse to read the comments after an article because I just can't stomach the bile that people seem unembarrassed to spew out when they feel that they are anonymous. And the comments that are posted in the Jewish press, these are sometimes the most shocking of all.

So I was pleasantly surprised last spring when I read an article about an internet troll that actually had a happy ending. For those of you lucky enough not to know what an internet troll is, according to the Urban Dictionary, they humorously describe a troll as "a mythological internet being that lives under an internet bridge. They love to hunt for innocent netizens. And then they antagonize them by posting racist or offensive comments. Oftentimes this is done anonymously."

Last December 28th, the comedian, and sister of a Rabbi, Sarah Silverman, decided to reach out via Twitter to Trump supporters with the hope of better understanding where they were coming from. She was making an honest attempt to try to see the world through their eyes.

Just after midnight on Dec. 29th, she received a response to her post from someone by the name of Jeremy Jamrozy. He replied to her inquiry with one word, four letters, starting with the letter “c”. It’s a word that is usually used to try to put a women in her place and to shut her up. It’s hardly a conversation starter, or an invitation for a friendship.

But Sarah Silverman did something really surprising in response to his tweet. Instead of responding with a pithy or cutting retort, she took the time to look at his Twitter feed in an attempt to better understand who he was, and she made the choice to engage with him with compassion instead of rebuke.

I can’t read their conversation verbatim from the bimah, so I’ll edit it for a “G” rating. She tweeted:

“I believe in you. I read ur timeline & I see what ur doing & ur rage is thinly veiled pain. But u know that. I know this feeling. Ps my back [hurts] too. see what happens when u choose love. I see it in you.”¹

And surprisingly, he responded to her tweet by opening up, and sharing more about his trauma and his pain, both physical and emotional.

And with that began an exchange throughout the night where Sarah continued to reach out to him, continued to encourage him to see the potential within himself, and to choose love rather than rage. And at the same time, she used her platform to call out to healthcare providers in his area to get him help.

Within hours she had changed the direction of his life. His first angry text came just after midnight, and by 4:30 in the morning he tweeted:

“I’m so thankful for the interactions. And support from everybody and the support and insight of Sarah Silverman. Awesome day.”

Sarah did something that the age of internet doesn’t always invite us to do, she stopped, she took it slow, and she paid attention to the person behind the tweets, and searched for the humanity in the person who was hiding behind the hurtful words.

The nature of the internet is to invite us to have increasingly simple responses to complex issues. A thumbs up, an angry emoji, a heart, these can not adequately replace real dialogue, or real human interaction.

When we sit, alone, at a computer, there is a temptation to present not only an unfiltered version of who we are, but also an inauthentic version of who we want to be.

¹ <https://www.boredpanda.com/comedian-twitter-response-sarah-silverman/>

This story about Sarah Silverman reminded me of the text that is written in Hebrew on the outside wall, behind our Ark. The story comes from the Talmud. In this passage a series of stories are told about a number of nameless individuals who set out with the sole intention to antagonize rabbis Hillel and Shammai. These anonymous men sound like predecessors to the online trolls of today.

The last story on our outer wall tells the last of many incidents and it goes like this...

“There was another incident involving one gentile 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. This was a common measuring stick and Shammai was a builder by trade. The same gentile then came before Hillel. Hillel 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 commentary. Go and learn it.” (Shabbat 31a)

“That which is hateful to you, do not do to another.” According to Hillel, that is the entire point of the Torah. That is the big idea that God gave to us at Sinai that transformed who we are, and who we are supposed to be.

It is our Mission Statement if you will, the idea that is supposed to be behind all that we do. All the stories, all the laws, all the mitzvot, all the prayers, all of these are simply guidelines and inspiration to help us fulfill the command to behave as decent human beings towards one another.

Later in this same part of the Talmud, the rabbis who were Hillel’s contemporaries flesh out this idea a bit more, not only what “that which is hateful to you, do not do to others” means, but also explaining what the other text on the other wall of our temple means, the verse from Leviticus 19:18: “V’havta l’rei’acha k’mocha - Love thy neighbor as thyself.”

The verse from Leviticus commands us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. It sounds simple right? Actually not so much.

One could argue that Jeremy Jamrozy, the man who Sarah Silverman interacted with was fulfilling the command “love thy neighbor as thyself” - because he did not love himself, and he was filled with self-loathing, and he then directed that same feeling towards her.

What Hillel says the Torah teaches us is actually much harder to fulfill. Because even when we are hurting, even when we don’t like ourselves, we still don’t want people to pile on more hatred onto us. We want them to treat us the way we are not able to treat ourselves in that moment. We want kindness. We want compassion. We want to be understood, and we want our suffering to be seen and alleviated.

When Hillel says “what is hateful to you, do not do to others” he is saying – find compassion in your heart for the people around you. Try to understand their suffering, and then, try to ease it.

And this is not so easy to do. But that is what the Torah commands us, over and over again, and saying it different ways, that this is what we should try to do.

When we are commanded to remember what it was like to be slaves in Egypt, God is telling us don't forget what it feels like when you are the one who is powerless, when you are the one being persecuted and who is suffering. God tells us over and over again that we should identify with the oppressed, and not the oppressor.

The point of the Torah is to give us a framework to use so we can create a civil society based on respect, compassion and justice. A society that sees itself as part of the family of humanity, created in the image of the Divine, tasked with the difficult job of elevating ordinary acts into holy interactions. A society that cares for even the most vulnerable, or even the least likable, amongst us, is not merely a civil society, it is a holy society.

I would contend that from 1968 to 2001 one of the most important voices on television was a rather humble, not terribly charismatic, Presbyterian minister who liked to wear homemade sweaters and tennis shoes. He was a man who didn't simply preach his faith, but who modeled it for others. He was someone who used his faith to uplift and to protect the most impressionable and defenseless amongst us. He worked diligently to bring people together, to help us find not only our common humanity, but also to inspire us to seek out the spark of the Holy that dwells within every person.

This modest man truly exemplified the command "Love your neighbor as yourself" because he saw every person as his neighbor.

I want to share with you one of his most powerful teachings, something for us to think about as we begin the new year and are given an opportunity to decide who we want to be in the year to come. It is advice to help us keep focused on what it means to have a "shana tova" – a good year.

Fred Rogers taught: "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."

I think Mr. Rogers and Hillel would have made excellent neighbors. Their specific words are different, but their intent is exactly the same.

Sarah Silverman didn't change the world with her tweets. But she did change Jeremy Jamrozy's world. She took a risk when she chose to respond not just with civility, but with compassion and with kindness.

Sarah has but one voice, but when she used it to call out to others to work with her, she was able to make a difference in a man's life, and change it for the better.

We can't own what other people will do with our words. But the High Holidays reminds us that we must own what we do with them.

Each of us has but one voice in this world. And that can feel like a small thing. But what happens if I use my voice to cry out for justice, to reach out to others with compassion, or to create an atmosphere of kindness?

And what if that causes you join your voice with mine? And then others might see that they are not alone, and they choose to join with us as well?

When our disparate voices come together as one voice, united, if not in purpose, but at least in tone, we can make a difference, we can change the tenor of our discussion from hostility to compassion, from anger to understanding, from discord to respect, all the while working to restore civility, to a sense of holiness, to a society that is desperate for it.

If we look at the problems that our society suffers from right now it can feel overwhelming. But as Rabbi Tarfon, who came a generation after Hillel, taught: “Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, ve lo atah ben horin lehibatel mimena – It is not up to you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it either (Pirke Avot 2:21).”

Each of us alone is not responsible for completing the task of changing the world for the better, or for changing the level of discourse that is breaking down our society, but that doesn't mean we don't have to work at it at all. It doesn't mean that we don't have to take responsibility for what we say, or what we post, or what we do.

Let us not wait for society to change, let us change society. Since change has to start with someone, why not with us?

This year, let each of us commit ourselves to restoring a sense of civility and respect, beginning with those whom we engage with on a daily basis, either in person or on the internet or any form of social media.

Before we say or do something, let us take a moment to ask ourselves what the impact of our words and our deeds will have on those around us.

These actions are easier to do if we simply keep Hillel's words ever present in our hearts: what is hateful to you, do not do to someone else.

This year, and every year, may the Holy One bless us with the strength to be kind, to be patient, and to be compassionate, not only with the people we agree with, but also with the people we have yet to understand.

Ken yehi ratzon - May this be God's will.