

2nd Day Rosh Hashana Sermon 2017
Kindness is the Answer
Rabbi Amy Eilberg

Sing *Achat Sha'alti*.

Mid-way through the month of Elul, I attended a meditation retreat with my dear teacher, Sylvia Boorstein, focused on the theme of lovingkindness. The retreat took place at a Buddhist meditation center, but Sylvia is deeply immersed in Jewish life, so I was unsurprised when she suddenly began to talk about Psalm 27, that we have been reciting every day since the beginning of Elul. In Buddhist sources, the qualities of kindness, compassion, generosity, and equanimity (which we count among the 13 Middot or Attributes of God), are called “Divine Abodes” – places where God lives. Sylvia associated to Psalm 27, in which we pray, “One thing I ask of God – this do I seek – to dwell in the house of God all of my days.” The house of God – the place where God lives. A beautiful conceptual parallel between the two religions.

Then she asked a remarkable question that I had never thought about before. What would it be like to be in the house of God?

I’d ask you to sit with that question for just a moment. Silently, ask yourself – literally and metaphorically - when you have had the sense that you were dwelling in the house of God?

For me, there are two answers. One is when I am in nature, surrounded by the majesty and grandeur of creation. I could elaborate on that, but I’ll save that for another sermon.

The other places and times in which I have that “house of God” sensation are when kindness and compassion naturally flow within me and, it seems, within everyone all around me.

I remember ten years ago when one of my dearest college friends died, without warning, of a massive heart attack at the age of 53. After receiving the terrible news, Louis and I got up – on a Saturday morning – went to shul, and then flew to Chicago to be with Jeff’s wife and children. Jeff was a person who was loved by virtually everyone he knew: a wide circle of friends from childhood, from college, from his current community and workplace. Jeff and Ellen’s home filled first with close friends and family and then with community members, sharing profound shock and deep grief over Jeff’s death.

In the midst of that experience of deep sorrow, I noticed a powerful quality of love and tenderness extended not only toward Jeff’s wife and children, but toward one another. We were all mourners, to a greater or lesser degree, suffering from a shocking and life-changing loss. In this terrible situation, we seemed to instinctively respond with kindness. We intuitively knew that everyone around us was suffering, and we naturally treated one another with the most kindness we could summon. That place was the house of God. Perhaps you’ve had that sensation in other houses of shiva, or in the aftermath of a particularly terrible loss. On that occasion, for a moment I actually asked myself, “Why couldn’t we be this kind and tender with one another all the time?”

One of the blessings of working as a hospital chaplain, as I did many years ago, was that I became a kinder person the moment I crossed the threshold of the hospital each day. Like anyone else, I could have been annoyed with a family member that morning, angry at another driver for taking my parking place, or anticipating an unpleasant encounter with a colleague at work. But when the doors to the hospital slid open, I immediately knew that I was surrounded by people in pain. People who were sick, who loved someone who was ill, people who were frightened, sad, confused and angry. My whole mind and body instinctively wanted to offer gestures of kindness to everyone I met (even to say “No – you go ahead”), because I knew that they were all suffering. And the staff,

who were in that hospital to offer healing, human presence, and compassion to the ill, often in extraordinary ways, were an inspiration. We were all in the house of God together.

That quality of kindness flowing spontaneously, effortlessly, and instinctively, often shows up in the immediate aftermath of natural – and unnatural – disasters. After hurricanes, we see people travel hundreds or thousands of miles to help with recovery efforts among perfect strangers. When asked why they had come, they say variations of, “I knew I could help, so how could I not come?” And most of us remember the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when we read that the ordinarily tough culture of New York City transformed into a house of God, with people reaching out to one another in a host of ways – providing food, shelter, comfort, prayer, whatever could be offered in the aftermath of unspeakable tragedy.

I know that when I am in one of those situations, I have a visceral sense of kindness welling up in me. I have observed this on many occasions and found it wondrous, that the impulse to reach out, to help, to soothe others, arose so powerfully from a deep place within me – and from everyone around me. I find it no less awe-inspiring now that I’ve learned that the flow that I had experienced was probably a rush of the hormone oxytocin: the “tend and befriend” hormone, less known than its harsher cousin, adrenaline, the “fight or flight” hormone. Yes, we are wired to respond with aggression when we or those we love are attacked. And we are also wired – as human beings – to tend and befriend those we consider to be close to us, or in need of care.

We are created in such a way that the powerful energy of kindness and care literally flows through us, and can be awakened at a moment’s notice. In those moments, when kindness is flowing through our veins and we see that others around us are feeling the same way, we are in the house of God.

I want to name another example. That is where we are right now. I first noticed this phenomenon 30 years ago, in my first experience as a pulpit rabbi. It was a large, suburban shul, where the prevailing culture was not as emotionally expressive as we are here at Kol Emeth. But come the *chagim*, I noticed the fervent, intentionally loving way people greeted one another. One member reached out to another to wish them a year of good health, a year of healing for a sick relative, a year of joy for a newly married adult child, a year of good fortune for someone struggling with infertility. Sometimes the words that people spoke were simple, like “*shana tova*,” but the tone was powerful. “*Shana tova*” was far more than a greeting; it was a prayer. I have noticed this everywhere I’ve been for the *chagim* since then - - mostly, of course, at Kol Emeth.

On the *chagim*, the liturgy reminds us in many ways of our finitude, our mortality, the fragility and precariousness of life. We say “*shehecheyanu*” with particular *kavvanah* at the beginning of the Kol Nidrei service, sincerely grateful that we and our loved ones (if it’s been a good year) have lived to see another year. And of course, the piercing imagery of *Un’taneh Tokef* –with entries in the mythical Book of Life about who will live and who will die in the coming year – brings us face to face with the existential uncertainty of our lives.

In that context, our natural kindness flows. We remember that we and everyone else in our family and community is fragile and mortal. We are aware – far more than in ordinary times of the year – that our many plans for our lives may come to fruition or they may not. We know that it is hard to be a human being – to live in a body that can fail us, to love others who will eventually die, or from whom we will someday have to take our leave. During these awesome days, we are more aware than usual that the same is true for everyone we meet. We seem to be conscious of the oft-quoted proverb, “Be kind, for everyone you meet carries a great burden.” In so doing, we not only pray, in

the words of Psalm 27, to dwell in the house of God. We actually inhabit that house together, right here, right now, offering one another the qualities of kindness, compassion, and generosity that our tradition names as godly.

I want to suggest that in the strange times in which we live, it is particularly important to spend time in the house of God all year long, just as we do so naturally during these Days of Awe. This year our country has been consumed with painful and divisive debates over fundamental issues. Hatred against Jews and people of color has come out of the shadows in terrifying ways. Natural disasters have multiplied and intensified. Everywhere, in our media-saturated culture, there is a din of people screaming at each other, or at caricatures of each other, across a variety of ideological divides.

Even in this sanctuary we do not all agree about all of the issues I have just alluded to. We agree that anti-semitism and racism are intolerable. But on many other civic issues, there are various perspectives represented in this room. That, I suggest, is a fundamentally good thing, because it gives us the chance – if we are willing – to learn about a broader range of views than we ordinarily encounter. And it gives us the chance to practice the art of living with difference which, I suggest, is precisely what our nation and our world most sorely need right now.

I have struggled mightily this year with the question of how to respond wisely and graciously to the contemporary state of our country. I believe the same is true for many of you – no matter your political perspective – left, right, or center. Those of us who feel that American society is uniquely challenged right now, and those of us have been concerned about name-calling, marginalization and demonization of those on our side of the spectrum, have all wrestled with how to respond to these divisive and troubled times in America.

Wherever we stand on the political spectrum, the proper response as responsible citizens surely includes raising our voices for issues that are deeply important to us. But beneath the specifics of things you or I advocate for, I suggest that the answer to the question: How do we live in these times? – is the very same instinctive practice that I’ve been describing. Particularly in our own community - where I assume that there are no racists, no anti-semites, no evil people, we could practice remembering that all of the human beings around us – even those whose politics are different from our own - are fragile, vulnerable persons like ourselves, struggling with the difficulties of living a human life, just as we do.

Even the people with whom we deeply disagree are carrying a great burden right now. They, like us, ache from the fragmentation and coarse rhetoric all around us. Those on the “other side” just like those on “our side” suffer from rhetorical aggression in virtually every news report. All of us live in the same war zone of a news cycle. This is a hard time – we are all in pain.

In the house of God, not everyone votes for the same political party. There is no political litmus test for entering; the door is open to all, if only we can recognize each other’s humanity, and remember that what we most need is what the other needs as well.

Yes, there are many things that responsible citizens may be moved to do in these times, including voting and lobbying and engaging in advocacy on issues of importance to us. But as least as important a contribution would be the practice of extending kindness, compassion and generosity to everyone - certainly within our own community and to all decent people in the society at large.

Just imagine: if hundreds of people in this room began to pour more kindness out into the public square – even at the same time that we express our views on issues of importance to us - imagine what a difference we could make. We would be adding more kindness to a social environment dominated by hostility and aggression. And we ourselves would be more regularly nourished by the sanctity and sustenance to be found in the house of God.

When we look around a house of shiva or a hospital waiting room or during the aftermath of a natural disaster, all around we see people who are weary and concerned, frightened and angry. Everyone is carrying a great burden. Why can't we see this truth in times of political turbulence just as we do at times of loss and terror? The answer is that we can. The answer is kindness.

So I ask you – let's spend more time in the house of God in the coming year, and not only with those people with whom we agree. Let us live out those aspirations we express so fervently in our prayers during this season, and make them just a little more real in our lives. May it be a year of sweetness and blessing for all of us, for our nation, and for the world. Amen.

Sing Achat Sha'alti.