

Won't You Be My Neighbor: On Compassion

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Exactly two weeks ago, Adam became a college student at George Washington University. Before we headed to the airport to take Adam to the other side of the country, I took one last look around his room. It was so empty, and so clean. As I stood there, I noticed his white kippah on top of his dresser, the one he wears each year on the High Holy Days, the one I brought back from Jerusalem for him and each member of our family. I immediately grabbed it and put it in his suitcase, tears streaming down my face, aware that this year, for the first time, Adam wouldn't be praying with us. His seat alongside Frank and Eli would remain empty, and I could no longer catch his eye or his sweet smile from my seat on the bimah. After composing myself, I decided to place two additional items in his college-bound duffel bag -- a packet of Indian spices, and a small sewing kit I'd given to Adam for Chanukah years ago. It hadn't yet been opened. And although these items weren't on the university's endlessly long packing list, I didn't want him to leave home without them.

You see, each of these things carries with it our deepest hopes and the essential values that Frank and I hold for our sons. The kippah, we hope, will help him remember that he belongs to a family and a people, and that he is part of something more enduring, more holy, and more important than classes and deadlines and dorm life. The sweet, fragrant spices, we hope, will remind Adam, who loves to cook, that despite the bitterness and chaos in our world, he has the power to bring sweetness and goodness to the places and people around him, wherever he may go. And the sewing kit -- I want Adam to know how to fix a tear in his pants and sew a button on his shirt. I want him to know that just because a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, or even sock has a hole in it, it doesn't mean we should get rid of it or have someone else fix it for us. I want him to know that with a needle and a little bit of thread, he can mend just about anything. And I want him to know that life is kind of like that as well.

When asked what we want for our children and grandchildren, so many of us respond that we just want them to be happy. Some add healthy as well. But we know that that's just not enough, not for our children and not for us, not in this world, which feels as if it's being ripped to shreds. I want for my children, for all of our children, above all else to be compassionate human beings. I want them to have the tools they need to mend our fractured world, to heal our planet, and to repair the gaping holes in the fabric of our society. I want for them to be responsible. I want for them to be honorable. I want for them to be honest and kind and generous. And I agree with the Dalai Lama who said, "If you want to be happy, be compassionate. And if you want others to be happy, be compassionate." I believe that a good life, a meaningful life, begins and ends with compassion. We know this. Our tradition has taught this for millennia. An ancient Midrash depicts the angels inquiring of each other, "When does Rosh Hashanah begin?" None of them seems to know. Ultimately, they determine that the answer can't be found in the calendar. The answer is found in our deeds. The angels contended that when we recognize the humanity and the divinity within every human being, and act accordingly, that is the time for the New Year to begin.[i]

But the problem is we are here now, and we are ready for the New Year to begin. We've heard the shofar blasts; we've blessed our round challahs and eaten brisket and tzimmes. We've tasted apples dipped in honey and so we can already taste the sweetness of this New Year. We need this New Year, 5779, right now, so that we can lift our souls and the soul of our world. We've seen the angels' aspirational vision of a world in which each person sees dignity and divinity in the other. But the problem is that today, there is a glaring lack of humanity, of decency, and of kindness. Rage and fear and divisiveness fill our streets and afflict our souls. Families have been torn apart, women and men have been degraded and far too many are being dehumanized every day. I know the angels said we should wait until everybody can see divinity and humanity in one another to start the New Year, but with all due respect to the angels, we can't afford to wait. Our children's future is at stake, the soul of our nation and our world is at stake, our planet is at stake, and our very humanity is at stake as well.

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the great 18th century rabbi and founder of Hasidism, recognized, like the angels, that the most important thing we can do, even before loving God, is to love one another. To see holiness in the other. In fact, every day before he prayed, he engaged in the following practice. He composed a chant for the words, "Here I am, ready to accept upon myself the mitzvah to love your neighbor as yourself." *V'ahavta l'reacha kamocho.*^[ii] He recited this chant over and over again, and only when his heart and his soul were filled with the essence of these words would he begin to pray. The Ba'al Shem Tov knew that the only way we can connect with God is to first see God's holiness in other people, to fully embrace the precept to love our neighbors as ourselves. Clearly the Ba'al Shem Tov understood that it's not always easy, not 300 years ago and certainly not today.

Maybe that's why this summer's surprise movie success was *Won't You Be My Neighbor*. It has surpassed all expectations becoming the highest grossing bio doc (biographical documentary) of all time. I remember avidly watching Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood as a child when it was first broadcast 50 years ago. I don't recall much of what he said, but I do know how the show made me feel -- comfortable and comforted, and that I really was part of Mr. Rogers' neighborhood, with its magic trolley, animal puppets, and King Friday the 13th. It turns out that Mr. Rogers tackled the day's most weighty and complex issues on his children's program. Like the Vietnam War. The assassination of Bobby Kennedy. Rampant racism. Death. Divorce. Disease. For him, the neighborhood was a microcosm of the real world. The king was opposed to change and built a high wall with sharp edges on top to keep strangers out of the neighborhood. Fred Rogers helped make sense of a troubled world in a turbulent time for a generation of children. He taught us how to be compassionate and caring human beings, and he honored the dignity in each child and in every adult. In an episode in the late 1960s, he invited police Officer Clemmons, an African-American man, to join him in cooling his feet in a children's wading pool. Together they sat, side by side, soaking their feet against a backdrop of racial intolerance, violence, and segregation. It was downright revolutionary. And years later, in the traumatic and tenuous days following 9/11, Mr. Rogers implored the American people to bring healing and love to their neighbors instead of fear, saying, "We are all called upon to be *tikkun olam*, repairers of creation." As a devout man of deep faith, his theology was clear: it was to love your neighbor, and we were all his neighbors.

Over the last few months there has been extensive focus in this country on how we treat our neighbors -- on the other side of the aisle and across the border, our neighbors across ethnic and racial lines, and our neighbors on the other side of political and economic divides. A lack of humility and humanity has pervaded our national conversation, dampening our spirits. It's been frustrating and maddening for us, contrary to everything we know to be right and righteous. Contrary to everything this day and our tradition teach us. And it's not only in our country, but across the world and in our beloved Israel as well. In his powerful new book, *Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor*, Yossi Klein Halevi reflects on the troubled relationship between Israelis and Palestinians. He observes, "The world is burning, neighbor. Not only our tortured corner of the planet; everywhere, despair is rising...and yet this is also a time when one can imagine humanity transcending itself. With our scientific and technological achievements, we can conceive of an end to hunger and disease. The world is in instant communication with most parts of itself, a kind of telepathy. When natural disaster hits one country, others immediately respond -- an entirely new kind of reality." [iii]

When I read his words, I thought back to a woman I met last October, on our congregation's social justice trip to Israel. She lives in Moshav Netiv Ha'asarah, a small farming community on the Gaza border, which we visited on the last day of our trip. There, we saw bomb shelters, decorated with birds and flowers so as not to scare the children, and the security barrier, massive and imposing with sharp, barbed wire wrapped across the top. The woman explained to us, "Before the wall was built, we would move freely, visiting our neighbors on the other side. We got to know each other and visited each other's homes." Now, she said, "Even though we can no longer see each other or borrow eggs or sugar from each other, we still talk on our cell phones. We can no longer discuss politics or the current situation. Instead, we talk about the children. The grandchildren. Our health. The important things." For her, and her Palestinian neighbors, humanity and compassion transcend even the highest wall and the deepest divisions.

And we've all seen humanity transcending itself over and over again closer to home as well. From deadly hurricanes to the devastating fires right here in our own backyard, people have run to save lives and rescue souls. I still vividly remember a video from a year ago during Hurricane Harvey where an older man was trapped in his truck as storm waters raged all around him. A group of women and men clasped their hands creating a human chain to rescue the man while not being swept away themselves. Across rushing waters they stood hand-in-hand, and the only thing that mattered was saving the life of the one man trapped in his truck, and keeping each other alive as well. It didn't matter what language each spoke, the color of their skin. Nobody asked, before they grabbed each other's hands, how they voted in the last election or their views on climate change or the NRA. And the same is true when we went to help those affected by the fires last fall. So many in our congregation made meals, sent money and clothes, offered to house strangers who had lost their own homes. Maybe that's why the great Talmudic sage, Ben Azzai said that "The most important teaching in the Torah, is that God created us one human family," so that nobody could say my people are better than your people.[iv] Maybe that's what it means to love your neighbor as yourself as well, to recognize that we are all the same, each endowed with a spark of God's divinity. In fact, the word for neighbor in Hebrew, *shachen*, is the very same word we use to describe the presence of

God, *shechinah*. To see the divine presence in our neighbors, that's what our tradition teaches, today and everyday.

Science has recently confirmed what Judaism has known for thousands of years and the good news is that we are all biologically hardwired for compassion. Dr. James Doty, a neurosurgeon and founder of Stanford's Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, explains, "Empathy is hardwired into our species. When we take care of each other, the pleasure centers of our brains light up. Altruism is not only a benefit to others, but it benefits us in terms of our health and longevity." "It's quite profound," Doty continues, "We evolved this way as hunter-gatherer tribes because if one person suffered, it put the whole group at risk. We learned to respond to those in pain." [v] And we have, in our nation, our community, and in our neighborhoods as well.

One evening a couple of years ago, the house across from where we live suddenly erupted into flames. Within minutes, the house was engulfed in fire, with enormous flames threatening the neighboring homes. One by one we all ran from our houses to see what was going on, but mostly to make sure everyone was safe. We all gathered on the street, directing the fire fighters, bringing water to those who inhaled smoke and chairs to those who were too weak to stand. What struck me then and still does today is that until that night, we neighbors didn't really know each other. We were ready to rescue lives and help when the fire was burning, but what about before that and every day since? Maybe it's just easier to love our neighbors from afar, or when disaster hits.

Since that day, I have been asking myself, what would it take for me, for us, to meet our neighbors, or to connect more deeply with those we already know? What would it take to knock on their doors when there is no fire, no flood, no illness, no shivah? What would it take to elevate humanity, to repair the frayed edges of our society, or our nation, or our lives? What would it take to repair the frayed edges of our relationships? Our very own souls? Making a call. Writing a long-overdue note. Volunteering. Voting. Acts of generosity. Compassion. We know what it takes; the shofar reminds us each year that you and I have the power, together with all other people, to stitch our world back together one loving deed at a time.

And when we encounter those who still insist on dividing and demeaning others, we only need follow Hillel's advice once again when he said, "*B'makom she'ain anashim, hishtadel eesh.*" In a place where no one is acting like a real human being, we should rise up, and strive to be a human being, a human being who is compassionate and honorable and kind. We each have the power to elevate humanity along with us and to illuminate the divine spark in each human being.

This is my prayer for the New Year. This is what I hope for my children, for all our children, and for us all.

Before I conclude, I want to share one last note with you about compassion and neighborliness. It was over these past months, during my darkest time, that I personally experienced the best of humanity. With every card and note, with your abundant prayers and heartfelt wishes, I felt so held and cared for and carried. And I thank you for your generosity. There is nothing like getting cancer that strips away all pretense and division among people. Over the weeks of my radiation, I got to know a group of women as we sat together in the waiting room in the basement of the hospital. There we'd wait,

day after day, women from all over, of varying nationalities, speaking different languages. We were of all ages, all sizes, all races and all religions. For some, it was our first diagnosis; others had journeyed this road before. Over time, we began to share our stories and we got to know each other's families and friends. We knew when one of us was in pain or had a particularly bad day. Before beginning radiation, each of us was given our own hospital gown to use throughout our treatment. It is called a Radiant Wrap, and it was lovingly created by a young man whose mother had breast cancer. He wanted her and other women to be clothed in a beautiful and dignified wrap of their own during radiation treatment. As I wore it each day, I felt surrounded by the radiance of humanity and held by the presence of God.

This year reconnected me to the power of humanity, and the power of true compassion inherent in every human being. My deepest hope, my most fervent prayer is that this year, our world and our lives are filled with humanity, goodness, holiness and love.

[I] DEUTERONOMY RABBAH 2:14

[II] RABBI JASON ROSENBERG, "LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," 2017

[III] PAGE 197, LETTERS TO MY PALESTINIAN NEIGHBOR, YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI, 2018.

[IV] JERUSALEM TALMUD NEDARIM 9:4

[V] "IT TAKES A DISASTER TO REMIND US OF OUR COMMON HUMANITY. LET'S NOT FORGET THAT TOO SOON," SUSANNA SCHROBSDORFF, TIME MAGAZINE, 9/18/17.