

5780/ 2019-Rosh HaShanah Day 1 Sermon

Take a Leap of Action

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Eye-rolling. Sneering. Hostile humor. These are all indicators of **contempt**, according to the founders of the **Gottman Institute**, an organization that is dedicated to improving interpersonal relationships.¹ **Dr. John Gottman** has studied thousands of married couples. Before he asks his patients to discuss any contentious issues that they may have in their marriage (which brought them to him for counseling in the first place), he asks them to tell their stories: how they met, their highs & lows as a couple, & how their marriage has changed over the years. After watching a couple interact for about an hour, Gottman has been able to predict with 94% accuracy whether that couple will divorce within 3 years².

And what are the indicators? Gottman's studies confirm that expressions of anger do not predict separation or divorce. Rather, the biggest warning signs are those that reflect contempt. That's right. Indicators like: Eye-rolling, sneering, & hostile humor.

The destructive power of contempt is also quite evident in contemporary American society and politics. In the words of **Arthur Brooks, CEO of the American Enterprise Institute**, at a speech that he gave at Harvard University's Kennedy School³: "We don't have an anger problem in American politics. We have a contempt problem... If you listen to how people talk to each other in political life today, you notice [that] it is with pure contempt."

¹(John Gottman is a social psychologist, relationship expert, and professor at U of Washington. He and his wife, Julie Schwartz Gottman founded the Gottman Institute in Seattle. Gottman is cited by Arthur Brooks, "Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America From the Culture of Contempt,"p. 23)

² Ibid, p. 23, footnote 4

³ Ibid, p. 23

Furthermore [in **Gottman**'s words⁴]:

“There’s been a denigration of respect in the dialogue in this country. It’s always “us”_versus “them”... We see Republicans thinking they’re better than Democrats, Democrats thinking they’re better than Republicans.”

[**Brooks** goes on to say⁵]

“The pandemic of contempt [regarding].. political matters makes it impossible for people of opposing views to work together. “

Just look back at the videos of the presidential debates, both in the lead-up to the Democratic primaries for the 2020 election as well as in the debates between Hilary Clinton & Donald Trump in the the lead-up to the 2016 election. What you see on these videos are vivid displays of eye-rolling, sneering, derision, and sarcasm, laced with pure unmitigated meanness.

Or just listen to politicians at all levels talk about their election opponents. Increasingly, they describe their opponents as unworthy of any kind of consideration. Speaking about and acting towards others with contempt when their views differ from your own means that you don’t merely disagree with them; you may be so dismissive of them that you believe that they are stupid or evil.

Contempt is driving many Americans apart from each other, even within families sometimes⁶. So, are we supposed to just accept this as the status quo?! I actually believe that there something that we can do about it: Our opportunity when treated with contempt is to change at least one heart.... our own. We may not be able to control the actions of others, but we can absolutely control our own reaction. Every one of us has the potential to break the cycle of contempt.⁷

⁴ Ibid, p. 23

⁵ Ibid, p. 24

⁶ Six siblings of incumbent Arizona Congressman Paul Gosar each made a TV ad for their brother’s opponent. One sister even called him a racist.

⁷ Ibid, p. 43

And one of the ways in which we can do this may sound glib, but I urge you to seriously consider it: When someone treats you with contempt, you can respond by just **BEING NICE**⁸.

Now, you may be wondering: How can you BEHAVE nicely if you have contemptuous THOUGHTS in your mind or negative FEELINGS in your heart?!

This may sound even more outrageous, but I believe that it is possible: When someone treats you with contempt and you FEEL just as contemptuous towards her as she does to you, ACT NICE anyway.. even if you have to **FAKE IT!**⁹ “Even if you don’t FEEL like being nice, you can still ACT the way a nice person would. [Act *k’ilu* you feel nice.] And, guess what? Soon enough, you might actually become a nicer person.....

This may seem counterintuitive.. Most of us assume that our ACTIONS follow our EMOTIONS: If we FEEL happy, [then we will] ACT happy.... [Only if we] FEEL joy [in our hearts, can we express that joy physically] with a smile. [Conventional wisdom is that] “BEHAVIOR follows ATTITUDE.”. While this [may be] true in some cases, it’s.. not the whole story... ATTITUDE [can also] follow ACTION.” In the words of the **Vietnamese philosopher, Thich Nhat Han**, “Sometimes, your JOY can be the source of your SMILE, but sometimes, your SMILE can be the source of your JOY.¹⁰”

⁸ This is what **Arthur Brooks** suggests in his recently published book (2019), “**Love Your Enemies : How Decent People Can Save America From the Culture of Contempt.**”

⁹ Ibid, p. 54

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 54

According to a (1993) study conducted by psychologists, **Paul Ekman & Richard Davidson**, the PHYSICAL ACT of smiling actually stimulates the part of the brain that is associated with positive EMOTIONS; you can actually FEEL HAPPIER by forcing yourself to SMILE. **ACTING “AS IF”** (*‘k’ilu*) one feels something, can actually result in FEELING that emotion¹¹.

These and other findings have revolutionized the way that many therapists treat depression. In addition to prescribing anti-depressant medications, some psychiatrists now also recommend cognitive BEHAVIORAL therapy for their patients; this is a form of therapy that boosts FEELINGS of HAPPINESS by modifying dysfunctional BEHAVIORS. When people FEEL UNHAPPY, they tend to BEHAVE in certain ways: They may become physically inactive, even stay in bed for hours during the day. They may frown a lot & refrain from interacting with other people.

On the flip side, there are certain things that people who FEEL HAPPY tend to DO: They get up and move around, they get out of the house, they engage with other people, and they smile. In cognitive BEHAVIORAL therapy, some therapists tell their depressed patients to try to ACT the way HAPPY people do. They prescribe BEHAVIORS to replace self-destructive ones like staying in bed in pajamas all day. They urge their depressed patients to get out of bed, take a shower, get dressed, eat breakfast, go outside, talk to other people, & smile... even if they are initially FEELING miserable inside. Yes, these therapists tell their depressed patients to PRETEND they are HAPPY. Eventually, each person’s INTERNAL EMOTIONS may adjust to match his/her EXTERNAL BEHAVIORS, at least to some extent.

¹¹ In 1974, **Dr. James Laird**, a psychologist at **Clark University** in Worcester, MA, conducted a series of experiments in which he induced his subjects to force themselves to smile or frown. (In order to hide the true purpose of his study, he attached fake electrodes to the subjects’ faces and told them that he was testing the activity of facial muscles under certain conditions.) He then showed the subjects photos of kids playing and photos of KKK members marching, while each of the subjects was required to keep a frown or smile on his/her face. Afterwards, Dr. Laird measured the moods of his subject. He found that they “described themselves as happier when they were in a smile expression & angrier when they were in a frown expression”, no matter which photographic image they were viewing.

The theory behind this type of therapy can also save UNHAPPY marriages. In his bestselling classic (1989), **The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People**, **Stephen Covey** tells the story of a client who approached him after one of his seminars and said, “I’m really worried about my marriage. My wife and I just don’t have the same FEELINGS for each other that we used to have. I guess I just don’t LOVE her anymore & she doesn’t LOVE me. What can I do?”

And this was Covey’s response to this man, just two simple words: “Love her.” To which the man responded in protest, “But I don’t FEEL love anymore. How can I love her when I just told you that I don’t love her?!”

To which Covey replied, “Love is a verb, an ACTION. The FEELING that we call love is a product of ACTS of love. Love, the EMOTION, is a fruit of Love, the VERB. So, LOVE your wife by engaging in LOVING ACTIONS. Listen to her. Affirm her. Empathize. Appreciate. If need be, make some sacrifices or concessions for her. Buy her a mushy card or other token or DISPLAY of affection.” Covey assured the man that if he TREATED his wife with love, her would eventually FEEL love for her again, because FEELINGS follow ACTIONS... Love, the EMOTION, is a value that is actualized through loving ACTIONS.

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Another example of the potential for ACTIONS to lead to changes in EMOTIONS or ATTITUDE can be found in college fraternities. In **Roger Brown's** classic textbook on **Social Psychology (1965)**, he describes one of the ways in which strong bonds are created between frat brothers during the rushing or hazing process. By requiring fraternity pledges to engage in humiliating or (at least) somewhat embarrassing acts BEHAVIORS (such as walking around campus naked), leaders hope to create FEELINGS of allegiance to the frat. BEHAVIORAL change lead to ATTITUDINAL changes through the mechanism of what psychologists refer to as **cognitive dissonance theory**.

After DOING certain ACTIONS that may defy rational logic, a fraternity pledge may undergo some dissonance between these BEHAVIORS and his initial FEELINGS towards the fraternity. Why in the world would he engage in this STUPID BEHAVIOR if he didn't feel any allegiance to this organization? In order to eliminate the dissonance & bring his FEELINGS more in line with his ACTIONS, the fraternity pledge's INTERNAL ATTITUDES might realign to be more in synch with his EXTERNAL BEHAVIORS during rush. Internally, he would be essentially saying to himself, "Why would I subject myself to such humiliation, unless I really FELT a connection to the other guys in the frat? Since I willingly PERFORMED these BEHAVIORS, I must FEEL this connection." And eventually, the fraternity brother's FEELINGS match up to his BEHAVIORS.



Another example of the potential for ACTIONS to influence ATTITUDES was demonstrated by a study conducted by (Robert A.) Emmons & (Michael E.) McCullough<sup>12</sup>. In this study, the researchers asked college students to provide a written report of their experiences once a week for a 10-week period.

One group was asked to list “5 things in your life that you are thankful for this week.” / A second group was asked to list “5 hassles that occurred in your life this week.” / A third group was asked to simply list “5 events that had an impact on your week”.

According to Emmons & McCullough: Students who kept a list of things they were grateful FELT significantly more satisfied with their lives than subjects who dwelled on negative or neutral events instead. Essentially, what this study demonstrated was that the very ACT of expressing gratitude can lead to FEELINGS of gratitude, appreciation, and happiness.

This concept is the foundation of Jewish blessings (*brachot*). When we recite a bracha (blessing) before or after we eat, this expression of gratitude for our food essentially heightens our awareness of the mundane act of eating, elevating it to a level of holiness. Reciting food blessings heightens our awareness of God and the farmers and other human beings who were part of the process of providing us with this food. Similarly, when we recite a *bracha* before lighting candles or before performing another mitzvah or after seeing a rainbow or other natural wonder, the WORDS of gratitude that we express out loud can lead to FEELINGS of gratitude and appreciation.



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<sup>12</sup> *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology* (Feb. 2003). Title of article: “Counting Blessings vs. Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude & Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life” (pp. 377-389). Cited in Brooks p. 60

The idea of BEHAVIORAL change leading to changes of ATTITUDES & BELIEFS is a very JEWISH idea, and not just with respect to the recitation of blessings. (*b'rachot*)

While there are Jewish thinkers like Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan who think that you have to first accept certain ideas with your INTELLECT before you ACTUALLY PERFORM any Jewish rituals, and while there are Jews who believe that you should wait to FEEL ‘something spiritual’ before you PRAY or engage in any other kind of spiritual ACTIVITIES, I believe that the better better way to approach Judaism is by beginning with what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel refers to as a “leap of ACTION.” According to Heschel & many other rabbis and Jewish thinkers, FEELINGS & BELIEFS only come after one repeatedly PERFORMS certain ACTIONS.

Similarly, the Rambam (Maimonides), in his Introduction to Pirkei Avot writes, “A person should cultivate his BEHAVIOR [first] in order to improve his CHARACTER....Know that good qualities (e.g. feeling connected to God and the Jewish community) can only be cultivated by repetitive ACTS.

Likewise, in *Sefer Ha-Chinuch*'s commentary on the mitzvot in *Parashat Bo*, it is taught “Know that a person is influenced by his ACTIONS & that his intellectual and spiritual life is conditioned by the THINGS he does.” In other words, ACTIONS can shape an individual's ATTITUDES & BELIEFS.

BEHAVIORAL CHANGE can lead to CHANGES IN EMOTIONS, ATTITUDES, THOUGHTS, & BELIEFS. First take a LEAP OF ACTION, first DO MITZVOT, & then, afterwards, INTERNAL CONVICTIONS will follow. This concept is encapsulated in the words that Bnai Yisrael uttered to Moshe & God in response to the giving of the 10 Commandments and the rest of the Torah at Mount Sinai. When asked if they wanted to receive the Torah, our ancestors said, “*Naaseh V’Nishma*” (“**We will do & [then] we will listen.**”) There are many *midrashim* and other commentaries on this phrase & the traditional understanding is that Bnai Yisrael first agreed to DO the mitzvot in the Torah before they even HEARD which commandments were included, before they had a chance to COGNITIVELY THINK THROUH & PROCESS the REASONS for these mitzvot.

Embedded in the phrase, “*Naaseh V’Nishma*”, is the Jewish value of DOING mitzvot before waiting to achieve a complete UNDERSTANDING & INTERNALIZATION of the REASONS WHY & the PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS of each and every mitzvah & of the mitzvah system as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

In her commentary on *Parashat Yitro*<sup>14</sup>, **Nechama Leibowitz** teaches, “Religious training should not proceed from MIND to DEED, from REASON to ACTION. The educator need not appeal to the student’s understanding through oral persuasion in the hope that [INTERNAL] CONVICTIONS will ultimately lead to the appropriate ACTIONS.”

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<sup>13</sup> This concept is described by **Barry Holtz** in his book, *Finding Our Way: Jewish Texts & The Lives We Live Today* (2005), with respect to prayer, the shaking of the lulav on Sukkot, & and the observance of other mitzvot.

<sup>14</sup> Studies in Shemot (the Book of Exodus), p. 180

Disagreements over this Jewish value became the ‘deal-breaker’ in a relationship that I had with a guy before I met my *bashert*, Adi. When I started having conversations with my then-boyfriend about the Jewish upbringing of our hypothetical children, my position was aligned with *Maimonides, Sefer Ha-Chinuch, Heschel, & Leiboitz* (among others), whereas the boyfriend (let’s call him “Solomon”) asserted that one had to BELIEVE & FEEL before engaging in any religious ACTS. Whereas I was looking forward to saying the bedtime “*Shema*” with my kids from the time they were born, Solomon said he didn’t feel comfortable exposing his kids to the “*Shema*” before they were old enough to comprehend the concept of God, and make rational decisions about whether or not they BELIEVED in God. While I was planning to teach my kids to say *HaMotzi* before eating bread & other blessings (*brachot*) before eating other types of foods, Solomon wasn’t comfortable with the idea of ‘forcing’ children to recite words that implied a belief in God at an age when they were too young to make a conscious COGNITIVE choice to believe in God, or FEEL emotionally or spiritually moved to express gratitude to God in the form of a *bracha*.

Needless to say, that relationship didn’t work out. And the one that did work out (25 years this November!) was one in which my husband and I agreed on some fundamental premises about Judaism, Jewish education, & Jewish practice. Adi & I agreed that our children should be taught to DO Jewish rituals, including saying blessings & prayers, from a very early age. And, then, as our kids grew up and matured, we would add layers of age-appropriate meaning to these WORDS & ACTIONS. We agreed not to wait until Ariel, Eva, & Rivkah were old enough to INTELLECTUALLY UNDERSTAND and accept God on a philosophical level or until they FELT INSPIRED to observe the mitzvot. If we had waited and waited, we might have been waiting indefinitely. And that would have been 3 missed opportunities for teaching and transmitting Jewish tradition and values from one generation to the next...an especially important value in the Malik-Wyner family since we are the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, &

we are especially committed to not violating what **Emil Fackenheim** refers to as the 614th commandment (“not to grant Hitler a posthumous victory”).

This same philosophy can be applied to the process of **TESHUVAH**, with which we are all encouraged to engage during this High Holiday season. During these 10 Days of *Teshuvah* between Rosh HaShanah & Yom Kippur, the goal is not to achieve some level of INTELLECTUAL AWARENESS or SPIRITUAL EPIPHANY before beginning to DO *teshuvah*. These *Aseret Y’mei Teshuvah* should be about CONCRETE ACTIONS, not just ABSTRACT THOUGHTS or BELIEFS.

Yes, as part of any resolution that you make to improve your character or your connection to Judaism in the year 5780, you do need to envision what you can become & resolve to achieve that vision. But, most importantly, you have to have a **PLAN OF ACTION**: a specific BEHAVIOR or set of behaviors that you can start **DOING** right away to help bring about the change that you seek.

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May I suggest that your action plan for 5780 include some New Year’s Resolutions that are specifically connected to your Jewish identity. [Refer to the NEON BLUE HANDOUT, which includes my suggested List of New Year’s Resolutions for 5780.](#)

As we begin the new Jewish calendar year **ה'ש"ף**, I pray that the ACTION PLANS & LEAPS OF ACTION that we take during the *Aseret Y’mei Teshuvah* (the 10 Days of Repentance) enable each of us to fulfill our God-given potential, and to improve our lives in specific ways, by strengthening our interpersonal relationships, as well as our connection to Judaism, to the Jewish community, and to the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*.

Ken yehi ratzon. L’Shanah Tovah u-Metukah. May you have a good & sweet New Year that is full of meaning & spiritual and personal growth.

7 Jewish New Year's Resolutions Suggested by Rabbi Malik: Pick One For 5780!

1- Pick a **Jewish holiday** that you have never observed before & start observing it to some extent this year. Never built or decorated a **Sukkah**? Resolve to build or decorate one this year or next. Never danced with a Torah or heckled the cantor on **Simchat Torah**? Make this the year that you do!

2- **Turn Saturday into Shabbat.** (And this doesn't have to be an "all" or "nothing" proposition!) If you don't already light **Shabbat candles** or say **Kiddush** before Friday night dinner, resolve to start doing these rituals at least once a month, beginning this week! Invite people to your home for **Shabbat dinner**. Arrange to meet your friends in **shul** on Shabbat.

3-**Give synagogue prayer services a chance.** Many people complain about traditional Jewish prayer services ("davening"), raising issues such as, "I don't understand Hebrew" and "Why can't I just pray what's in my heart?" Know that **you are not alone!** The best way to feel more comfortable in services is to **come to shul more often!** If you try everything and still feel that prayer isn't working for you, **come to shul anyway;** just don't pray. (Yes, that's what I said!) Come for the D'var Torah (speech about the Torah portion). Come for the community. And, yes, it's OK to come "**JFK**" (**Just For the Kiddush**)!

4-**Mitzvah Day (Sunday, October 27,** from 9:00 AM-1:30 PM), which includes a blood drive, a coat drive, clothing drive, and food drive. It is a mitzvah to donate blood! Get involved in other activities organized by TBA's Social Action Committee. Consider volunteering to feed the hungry by serving food to people in need at the Bayshore Lunch Program of the Community Church in Keyport. Visit a congregant who is sick or homebound. Volunteer to drive an elderly person to doctor appointments. Bring a meal to a congregant who is in need. Attend a shiva minyan.

5- **Give more tzedakah** in the year ahead and be more purposeful about the way you allocate your donations to different organizations. Think carefully about which secular causes you want to support and which causes you want to support in the Jewish community. In addition to giving tzedakah to your synagogue (in the form of membership promises, Kol Nidrei donations, and participation in shul fundraisers), also consider giving to other Jewish organizations, including the Federation in the Heart of NJ or to one of the many charitable organizations in Israel.

6- Commit to **educate yourself Jewishly** in the coming year, no matter how old or young you are! Resolve to **study the Torah portion** every week and/or **read at least one Jewish book** per month: whether it's a work of fiction or non-fiction or a book from the Tanach (the Jewish Bible). Or resolve to **learn to read Hebrew** with Susan Einbinder or **learn to chant from the Torah or Haftarah** with Risa Doris (In 5779, Risa taught three adults how to read Haftarah &/or Torah, who are now regular Torah and/or Haftarah readers!!) Consider going to one of our **Adult Education** classes this year, perhaps one of our "**TBA WOW**" ("**WithOut Walls**") offerings. Some of these classes will be held at the Marlboro Library and other public venues; others classes will be held at congregants' homes throughout Monmouth County.

7- Become **more connected to Israel** this year! Whether you have never been to Israel before or you have been to Israel too many times to count, resolve to visit Israel in 5780! Think about joining TBA's "**Return To Israel**" with Rabbi Malik from **October 19-30, 2020**. Join our synagogue delegation at the **AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) Policy Conference: March 1-3, 2020**. Become involved in TBA's **Israel Affairs Committee**. Join us at TBA for Celebrate Israel Shabbat on **May 2, 2020**. You can also support Israel by **buying Israeli products** and by giving **Israel Bonds** as gifts for B'nai Mitzvah, weddings, and other simchas.

