

Competitive Kindness

Ruchi Koval / Parshat Vayeilech / September 30, 2022

The other day I had a doctor's appointment. Nothing major, just a little toe issue. Thank God I don't have to go to the doctor very often (and I do mean thank God) so I forgot that you need to wear a mask in the office. Okay, I took the proffered mask and wore it like the good sport that I am.

But then I found myself waiting in a long line and getting somewhat irritated, which is a nice improvement from my default mode in long lines, which is *very* irritated. I craned my neck trying to see how many employees were working behind the desk so that I could successfully judge whether or not the office had its act together. There were only two people working the long line.

Then I remembered.

My daughter, Miriam, works at a local pizza restaurant, and she often shares stories with us about her experiences working the counter. It's incredible how some people are kind and thoughtful, clearing their table and being polite and gracious, whereas others are snippy and short-tempered. It's easy to look down on the latter category. Until you find yourself thinking uncharitable thoughts about the office you happen to find yourself in.

Here's what I've learned from my kids' experiences working in retail and food service. Everyone is short staffed right now. Some large companies purposely short-staff their stores to save money, so the burden falls on their employees to pick up the slack of the shortage, leaving them in the weeds and overwhelmed much of the time. When a customer walks in and takes out their irritability on the employee who is there, who did show up, who is doing their job, it's totally misplaced.

So one day I walked into the pizza place where Miriam works and said to her, "I am going to be your nicest customer today." I waited patiently for my food, cleaned up after myself, and thanked her for the meal, just as I taught my kids to do when they were little. I was a model of perfect citizenship, if I do say so myself.

Fast-forward to the doctor's office. I told myself that these secretaries were overwhelmed, that the office was clearly short-staffed, and that I was going to set up a personal challenge to myself to be the nicest patient in their office that day. (I'm competitive like that.) I waited my turn calmly and said a nice big hello with a smile when I got to the front. She couldn't see my smile, but she could see my eyes.

She asked me for my insurance card, a pet peeve of mine – don't they have that on record? But I politely told her that I didn't have it with me and maybe she could check the system? She told me that the system made them re-enter the info every calendar year! See, I never knew that. Now why should I take it out on her if that's annoying? She's just as annoyed as I am. I told her I would bring it in next time, and thanked her for explaining it to me. Then she said, "Well thank you, because not everyone is as agreeable as you."

SCORE! Best. Patient. Ever. See? I knew it.

My point: what an enormous amount of power we have, to make a stressed-out person's day better or worse. My kids helped me get my mind in someone else's shoes, and I sure know how I want to be treated. So maybe we could each get competitive, and try to win the "customer-of-the-day" competition.

Ready? Game on! A perfect challenge for this special Shabbat, called "Shabbat Shuva," the Shabbat of repentance in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.