I recently heard a story from an older gentleman said he was in a drive-through and took some time figuring out what to order. The woman behind him, obviously impatient, began to honk her horn and yell. To teach her a lesson about patience, he said that when he got to the first window he paid for her order, *and* then said he would be paying for the person behind him. The cashier must have told the driver when she got to the window, because the driver leaned out, waved to him, and said, "thank you, thank you", probably feeling embarrassed that he had repaid her rudeness with kindness. He continued, "When I got to the second window, I showed the server both receipts … and I took her food, too." Whatever lesson he wanted to convey, I'm pretty sure he did *not* do a good job teaching what it means to repay a kindness.

Joking aside, we live in a time when patience, tolerance, civility … just simple kindness, is in short supply. Recent studies allude to a deep societal sense of despondency. Since 1990, the number of Americans saying they have no friends has increased four-fold.[1] Teenagers and college-age young people express particularly deep feelings of sadness or hopelessness. Not a week goes by when we don't hear news of an unruly or violent airline passenger or incident of road rage. Hardly a month passes without a mass shooting. How many of you think others are driving more recklessly recently? Studies back up that intuition. Many of you tell me how much ruder and more abusive your customers, clients or patients are than they used to be. Little surprise that a poll this year found that more than two-thirds of those who said they were lonely also had strong feelings of anger.[2] In politics, on social media, in daily interactions people are acting out in ways that are hateful, less civil, more divisive, and polarizing. No wonder so many feel frayed and frazzled, cynical, and suspicious – and it is tearing at the fabric of common decency that binds us to one another.

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[1] "The State of American Friendship" (2021)
[2] "Loneliness in U.S. Subsides from Pandemic High", Gallup Poll (April 4, 2023)

Yom Kippur offers us a chance, however, to reorient ourselves. But to what? The answer, this day suggests, is quite simply, this – in the face of boundless anger, even hate, we must show ever greater kindness.

When the Torah is taken from the Ark a little later, words reserved for the most sacred moments in the Jewish year will be sung – "Adonai, Adonai, God compassionate (רחום *rachum*) and gracious, slow to anger, רב חסד *v'rav chesed* (exceptionally kind)." One rabbi in the Talmud underscored this by saying that the Torah both begins *and* ends with kindness. In the beginning God clothes Adam and Eve, and as a final act of tenderness, buries Moses.[3] His rhetorical point is clear. Being Jewish begins and ends with kindness. And for those not so sure about God, consider this teaching of the Talmudic sage Rabbi Natan bar Abba, who said that any Jewish person who is unkind is not truly the seed of Abraham.[4] OK, maybe he was exaggerating to make a point, but this sacred day compels to admit that our words or behavior have the power to strengthen others or shut them out, to offer aid or afflict, to honor or humiliate, to build loving bonds or tear them asunder.

"Just be nice" is not some pollyannish cliché. Kindness isn't a cozy Teddy Bear we hug as we go to sleep. As Rabbi Angela Buchdahl suggests:

> Kindness requires us to give something up:
> Our comfort. Our convenience. Our insularity. Our certainty.

She's right. Kindness is hard. First, because to be kind means understanding life is filled with suffering. Second, kindness requires us to care for those who may well make us uncomfortable. It demands that we put aside judgement, and act with compassion even when its hard. And third, kindness demands being intentional and attentive – in how we speak *and* how we act.

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[3] Babylonian Talmud, *Sotah* 14a
[4] Babylonian Talmud, *Beitzah* 32b

Kindness Begins with Loss

One of my most vivid memories of my father was one summer day when he took our family to volunteer at a summer picnic for children who were deaf and/or blind. His compassion was evident as cried as he helped. I fondly recall joining my grandmother and great aunt in bringing fresh flowers to those who were home-bound. In these ways and so many more, my family taught me that kindness often grows in the soil of pain.

In contrast, the kiss of kindness often felt elusive to me throughout my childhood. The reason is because until I turned 14, I was very overweight. Yes, I was adored by my family. I had friends. But too often I felt the sting of teasing, the pain of being the last person chosen for softball team or picked on just because I was fat. Then, nine months before I became a Bar Mitzvah my father was not feeling well and went to the hospital. I was staying with my grandmother and great-aunts so my mom could be with my dad. The next morning, my Nanny Dora (whose son was killed fighting for our country in World War II, and for whom I was named) came to me and said, "Your father's gone." And I knew, in an instant, the painful truth my grandmother knew - that kindness and love are no shield from the cruelty of life.

The poet Naomi Shihab Nye reminds us that kindness is not a naïve sense that everything is OK or we can make it so. Kindness grows from an awareness of loss.

> Before you know what kindness really is
> you must lose things,
> feel the future dissolve in a moment
> like salt in a weakened broth.
> What you held in your hand,
> what you counted and carefully saved,
> all this must go so you know
> how desolate the landscape can be
> between the regions of kindness….
> Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
> you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing…

The more we ride the carousel of life, the more we understand that pain comes to us all. Early or late, each of us loses those we love. We fail. We are betrayed.

We face loneliness. And yet, it is in those moments that a simple word or act of kindness can make al difference.

In 2014 Trieste Belmont was struggling with depression. After the death of a grandmother and breakup, she was bereft. Walking home from work, she crossed a high bridge, stopped, looked over. and remembers thinking, "I feel useless. I'm a burden. It would be better to end my life." At that moment car passing by slowed down, the driver opened the window and shouted. "don't jump". "Those words just changed everything for me," she remembered. "Having a stranger care about me in my darkest time made it so that I didn't jump, and it saved my life."

Earlier this year I hurt my back, so badly that walking stairs was painful. At the time I had a *shiva* that involved walking up 7 flights of stairs caring the prayer book bag. Suddenly, a young couple heading up to the *shiva* asked if they could help as we ascended level by level. "It's nothing," they said to me at the top. But it wasn't "nothing". Their caring helped – body and spirit.

To be kind really does not take a lot. But it can mean all the difference in the world to those in need.

Loving others as they are

There is a story in the Talmud about a man who was interested in becoming Jewish, but first wanted to know the essence of Judaism. He approached the sage Shammai who, holding a builder's square in his hand, turned him away. Hillel, however, had him stand on one foot and taught, "Do not do to others that which you would not want done to yourself. The rest is commentary, go and study." The tale is a wonderful reminder that the foundation of faith is treating others with the kindness that we ourselves would want.

But there is more to this story. Why does the Talmud care to add such a seemingly unimportant detail about Shammai holding a measuring square (the right-angled instrument that keeps everything in line and straight)? It is a literary device that underscores how Shammai spent his life judging other people by a

standard he constructed. In essence, he was saying to someone from a different point of view, "I hold the measure of what is right. And so, your life and decisions will be judged by *my* understanding of what is true."

In contrast, Hillel offers a much more flexible standard to what Judaism is all about. Rather than some unyielding, objective judgment he teaches that the way into a full Jewish life is based on our own perspective (as Rabbi Sank Ross spoke about so beautifully last night). For Hillel, our behavior towards others is founded in an open mind, a perspective of kindness that says: What you are willing to accept, I may not. Or ... if you will, what you reject, I accept. Rather than berating or dismissing those who come with a different point of view, Hillel challenges us to see others for who they are at their best – and from that raise them up.

On this holy day when our judgement is sealed, let us learn from this that how we are judged is tied to how we judge others. A willingness to give someone the benefit of the doubt (even those with whom we disagree or drive us *meshugah*) *is* an act of kindness. And truly caring for them rather than rejecting them out of hand (as frustrating as that may feel) is the kindness that can bring others closer.

Fixing the world begins by fixing just one

> There once was a synagogue that had fallen on hard times. The membership numbers were down, the building was in disrepair and the spirit had gone from its members. The challenges brought rancor and debate. A rabbi visited the community, and the people asked her for advice. "I have no advice to give you," the rabbi said, "But I can tell you: One of you is the Messiah." After she left the congregants scoffed, but alone, each one wondered if – just maybe – the rabbi was right. As the months wore on, they thought, "Maybe my neighbor is the Messiah, and I should treat him more kindly." One person thought, "I know Aaron is cranky, but even though he complains, he is often right. In fact, he's usually right. Maybe *he* is the Messiah." Another wondered, "Sarah is so mousy – she hardly says a word. But she is always around helping, so humbly giving to everyone. Perhaps she is the Messiah."

> And you know what happened? Everyone began to treat each other with greater respect on the off chance that their neighbor was the Messiah. When new people came to the community, they sensed something special about the place. It wasn't just the beautiful building. When they came in the doors of the synagogue, they felt a sense of respect people had for one another … a palpable sense of kindness. After a while, these new people brought their friends and, in due course, the synagogue was vibrant and alive again – all because the rabbi who came knew that this was a place where the Messiah dwelled.

Some 2000 years ago the sage Ben Azzai anticipated this story with his teaching מצוה גוררת מצוה *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, "one mitzvah leads to another."[5] Kindness really does multiply on itself, and we truly never know in the web of life how one thoughtful word or deed will pay itself back to us. But I believe kindness given freely does help us, making the community and society around us more forgiving, more accepting, and more compassionate.

Rabbis are often asked, "how big is your congregation?" As many of you know I like to say the right question is really, "how *small* is your synagogue?", meaning is this a place where each person feels known, is heard, and can find a place. But recently I've come to think the best question to ask is, "how caring is your community?"

I am honored to serve our community because I have seen, more times than I can count, how kind people often are to one another. When one young mother was dying of cancer, friends – and even strangers – ensured that her husband and children had meals. How grateful I am when so many of you contact me or one of my clergy colleagues to tell us someone is ill or having surgery. Since we cannot be everywhere, we rely on you to tell us.

But there is more we can do, which is why we are reinvigorating a group in our synagogue called Mitzvah Corps. This group will meet one month from tomorrow - on Thursday, October 26 at 9:30 am – to consider ways we can best support and show kindness to one another. Push aside the excuses: "I don't have the time. I

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[5] Pirkei Avot 4:2

don't know these people. Maybe someone doesn't want to be contacted." Trust me, people will appreciate you being part of Mitzvah Corps more than you can imagine.

But even if you don't volunteer for Mitzvah Corps, just show up for others this year, and say you care. Go to the *shiva*. And six months later take them out for coffee (they will still be hurting). If someone says there is a *brit milah* (*bris*), *brit bat*, or baby naming/welcoming, go. Is someone you know house bound? Call them every so often, stop by, or volunteer to shovel their walkway. Offer to drive those who need to doctor's appointments. Welcome those who are new here. Say "please" more. Write a thank you note. Shammai (yup, same guy) taught, "greet others with a pleasant countenance (OK, he didn't practice what he preached!) – but he was right, what does it hurt to smile and say "hi"?! And, hardest of all, be patient when you leave services today in the parking lot with our attendants and fellow congregants (what, are you rushing to lunch?!)

A final thought. Many years ago, a six-year-old boy and his family were leaving their native Poland. On the day before their departure, the father him to the town where the Chassidic master lived so that he could receive the Rebbe's blessing for their trip. They stayed overnight in the Rebbe's home and the child stayed in his study. The boy could not sleep. In the middle of the night, he saw the Rebbe enter the room and so he pretended to be asleep. He heard the Rebbe whisper, "Such a sweet child." Then, thinking the child might be cold, the Rebbe took off his coat and placed it on the sleeping boy.

Years later, when the boy was now 90 years old, he was asked what the source of his great kindness was. He replied, "Eighty-four years ago my Rebbe lovingly placed his coat upon me to keep me warm. I am still warm from that coat."

Every word you say … every act you make … can be that warm coat. Torah begins and ends with kindness. This Yom Kippur 5784, then, may we vow to act in ways so that 84 years from now people are still warmed by our kindness.

Articles and Books used in preparation for this sermon included:

- "A National Tantrum at a National Park," Tiya Miles, *The Atlantic* (December 2022)
- "How America Got Mean", David Brooks, *The Atlantic* (September 2023)
- *Humankind: A Hopeful History*, Rutger Bregman (2021)