

## Civility

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5776

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A few weeks ago, a group of women was kicked off the Wine Train in Napa Valley for making too much noise, in an incident that prompted accusations of racial bias. But none of the papers that reported the incident suggested that perhaps the women had been, simply, too loud for the others on the train. In fact, it turns out, that about once a month, every month, for the past twenty-five years, a group of passengers are removed from the train for making too much noise.

All of us have had the experience of others who are rude, have we not? Out to dine with friends, and at a nearby table, someone amongst a foursome is inebriated, shrieking or shouting, oblivious to all around them. Or we're out to dinner with friends or worse, yet, have them over to our house and, mitten drinen, right in the middle of everything, one of them takes out a cell phone, mumbles, "sorry", and proceeds to read and then respond to a text! Or the Republican front-runner for the presidency of the United States (!), who, rather than engage in serious policy declarations, instead spends his time in personally attacking others.

Is there any doubt that there is more rudeness than ever out on the road? Drivers, hundreds of feet before the left hand turn lane starts, are racing up the middle of the street in between the yellow lines rather than wait until they are closer to enter into the designated area or on the freeway, who use the emergency breakdown lane as their private road. How about those who light up the dark movie theatre as they look at their hand-held devices during the show? Or – my favorite- those who take their dogs into department stores where they proceed to bark at others? This "crude, rude, and attitude" seems to be everywhere we go. Increasingly we behave as though others are invisible or that they simply don't matter, that other people's feelings are inferior to our own.

The social philosopher, Stephen Carter, in his book, aptly titled "Civility," writes how, in our increasingly isolated world, it is harder and harder to treat others civilly. We are under the illusion that we are traveling alone through this world and we begin to feel that we owe little to the other people around us. We care less and less about them because their lives seem to have nothing to do with ours. Too often we see others as obstacles, obstructers, competitors. We believe that we do not really live in a community, and that instead, with the exception of our friends, we are surrounded by strangers. Thus, we are witnessing a decline in empathy, in the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. There seems to be more outrage over Cecil the Lion shot in Southwest Africa by an entitled NY dentist, or by ISIS's destruction of priceless heritage sites, than the plight of millions of Syrian refugees. If we are indifferent to those who are immediately around us, how are we to feel the pain of others with whom we share even less?

More than ever, then, we need to remember that this evening marks the anniversary of humanity's creation. Five thousand, seven hundred and seventy-six years ago, according to our tradition, human beings were made- just two of them - reminding

us that we all trace our ancestry back to two individuals, and, thus, all of us are, ultimately, related to one another. And if we are related to one another, then we have to go out of our way to treat one another well. Also, on this day, we are reminded that human beings were created in the Divine image. Each one of us carries the image of God and so each of us, again, must be treated as though we are special.

To behave badly toward another or to act as if they are invisible, is, in our tradition, viewed as a grave moral offense. If we embarrass someone in public so badly, that the blood drains from their face, it is as if we have murdered them. Next week, on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, we will read a selection from the book of Leviticus which instructs us how to be holy. How are we to do so? Offer sacrifices? No. Pray more often? No. Rather, don't steal, don't gossip, watch our language. In short, to be holy is to show sensitivity toward others, to treat them respectfully.

For the sake, then, of keeping compassion alive within us, for the sake of understanding that we and the stranger before us share our humanity, we need to take a closer look at how we behave with those around us; with family, friends, co-workers and neighbors. We need to restore civility to our world and, in doing so, affirm the sacredness of other human beings.

This evening, then, the anniversary of our common creation, I want to talk with you about the little stuff, the quotidian ways in which we interact with others and in which we constantly fall short. While next week, on Yom Kippur, I'll examine the large, existential issues: where are we going, what is the purpose of our life, and talk about world issues, tonight, as we begin our Days of Awe, I want to focus on how we are going, and to look at the effect of our actions on the lives of others and in the life of our community.

In our tradition, behaving civilly towards others is known as *derech eretz*. *Derech eretz* teaches us that we share space with others. Yes, that means not talking too loud. It means that when we go through a door we should hold it open for those who follow us. It means that a good cigar is never to be smoked within a quarter-mile radius of another human being. It means refraining from leaning on the horn when the car ahead of us is slow to move when the light turns green. It means not talking during a movie or sleeping during the rabbi's sermon.

*Derech eretz* calls on us to be considerate. Some of you may know that for the past few months I've been driving a Smart Car. And, since it is, in essence, a car body placed on top of a lawn mower - it goes from zero to 60 in a minute and one-half - I have, by necessity, become a more cautious and also more considerate driver. I find myself motioning cars at the stop sign to go ahead of me. I no longer race alongside others before suddenly cutting in front of them. And I find that the other drivers respond, with a smile, a nod, a wave instead of a finger. Can we let others get ahead of us in line at the checkout counter, squeeze into the elevator to let another enter? In short, can we offer random acts of kindness to others?

*Derech eretz* means that we should smile or smile more. Yes, smile. Smiling is one of the most social things we can do. When we pass another on the sidewalk, instead of pretending that they're invisible, try a smile. Try smiling at work. It's infectious, it lifts everyone's mood, and behavioral scientists tell us that when we do so, it alters our chemistry for the better, as well. Smiling says to others: I wish you no harm, in fact, I hope all is well with you. If smiling is too hard, at least nod your head to acknowledge

another, and always, always, if someone says hello to you, say hello back, acknowledging and confirming their existence, their worth as a fellow human being.

Derech ertz calls on us to listen to what others have to say. Truly listen. Giving someone our total attention, not breaking in on their words, letting them finish a sentence. It's one of the most profound gifts we can give another human being, the sense that they are being fully heard. Watch for this tomorrow afternoon when we're at the beach for Tashlich. After you're done practicing smiling at everyone, ask one of the familiar faces you see there: "How ya doing?" "What's new?" and then see if you can keep your lips pressed together while they talk. And if you interrupt, catch yourself interrupting.

Derech ertz involves words of apology. I'm not talking now of the deep words of apology that some of us may need to share with someone whom we have seriously wronged or who we've been on the outs with for some time. No, I'm talking about the simple words, "Excuse me", "I'm sorry", when we inadvertently do something to anger or annoy another. This last New Year's eve, I was driving home from a party, perfectly sober, thank you very much, and found myself on Venice Blvd. before a long line of cars having to go through a sobriety check-point. Rather than sit there for 30 minutes, I decided to turn the car around and drive home by another route, immediately catching the attention of a patrol car that pulled me over. I immediately blurted out to the officer that I was genuinely sorry, genuinely sober, and just wanted to get home. My apology had immediate effect (or perhaps I didn't look like a partier) and I was sent on my way without a ticket. Sometimes, sincere contriteness can go a long way.

Derech ertz is about being on time. When the appointment is for 11, it means being there at 11. To arrive late is, essentially to announce to the other person that we don't think that their time is valuable and we really don't care that our lateness may be causing them problems. Being on time means answering RSVPs. What could be worse than to refuse to respond to an invitation? Or to delay so long that the other has to make a call to you to beg you for an answer? Actually, there are worse actions: RSVPing yes, and then not showing up. Or - and I hear this one a lot from brides and grooms - to receive a wedding invite and then respond that you'll come but only if you can bring along a date.

Derech ertz is about being generous. Generous with our money in giving to those who are standing next to the traffic lights at busy intersections asking for change. Generous with our time in helping out a friend, answering a question, researching a problem for another, coaching a team, volunteering at a school, or local club. Generous with gifts toward others: a recipe, a great book, not just a book suggestion but the book, itself. Generous in praising others. Generous in letting others go first.

There is the story told of a man who decided to walk from the East to the West Coast. It took him nearly a year. At the end of his journey, he was asked what had given him the most problems on his transcontinental walk. He replied that it wasn't the heat or cold nor the rugged terrain. What gave him the greatest problem were the small pebbles that got into his shoes and made the walking difficult.

Each act of incivility is a pebble on our journey through life. Conversely, each act of derech ertz: holding a door open, letting someone into our lane, watching our language, reducing our gossip, smiling and greeting another, showing up on time, apologizing, being generous, makes our journey smoother. May this New Year, 5776, be a year in which our practice of derech ertz increases. May we remember that each act of

kindness and courtesy we extend to another, even though small, helps us to recognize other human beings as fellow travelers with us on the road of life, and helps us to bring more goodness and blessing into the world.