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Oh, the Humanity

This isn't the way things were supposed to be. At this time last year, I - and likely many of us - assumed that by now, COVID would be over. We would stay home, we'd wear our masks, and when the vaccine arrived, we'd get it. By tonight, we'd be hugging and high-fiving as you all streamed into High Holy Day services. Not streaming High Holy Day services from our living rooms again. We were supposed to be sitting here together tonight, having learned and grown from the last eighteen months, and come through the valley of darkness, basking in the light of a post-COVID world. Together.

But here we are, again.

In some ways, this moment feels more frustrating than last year, since it felt like we were so close to re-entering our "new normal" in those warm, early days of summer. But now, it seems like this world of variants and looming questions and seemingly endless pivots may, in fact, be what "new normal" really looks like.

Perhaps now, looking back on those bright and sunny days, as we stand tonight on the precipice of another new year, we might think of this past summer as a bit of a beta test for re-entering the world. We made lots of good progress, had lots of good experiences, and we learned some things - about ourselves, our world, and how deeply connected we are to our fellow humans - as well. In the many months of quarantine and isolation, we discovered how much we need and crave human connection. For my family, and I hope for many of you, as well, this summer was all about reconnecting and catching up. Think back to those first hugs, being reunited with friends and family after too many months apart. Some of us may still be waiting for those hugs, still nervous about whether or not it's safe to re-enter the world. But on some level, as people re-emerge into the world beyond our homes, it seems like, as a broader society, we've forgotten some of the key elements of how to be human, how to treat others with kindness and decency.

You know what I'm talking about, we've all seen it. Drivers who seem to have forgotten common courtesy on the road, weaving and dodging as if other cars don't exist. Awkward conversations between more casual acquaintances (think back to how many times you had the same conversation about "How was your quarantine..."). People walking through doors without holding them open (or, perhaps even worse, walking through a door *you're* holding open without even acknowledging your presence). The myriad stories in the news about the rise in hate crimes against Jews, black people, Asian-Americans, and other people of color. It's as if our social distancing actually made us more emotionally distanced from others.

But then, this summer, there was a moment that restored my faith in the possibility of humanity and human decency. In our ability to understand and care for each other.

This summer, to kick off my sabbatical, my family and I went to Yosemite. Now, I'm embarrassed to say this as a native Californian, but I'd never been, and in recent years, I've been longing to go. Well, we finally made it, and it was absolutely incredible. That vista of El Capitan and Half Dome and Bridalveil Falls, with the lush Valley below, as we drove out of the tunnel was simply breathtaking.

But there was one moment that really stood out to me. One small act of kindness restored my sense of hope that there may be new moments and new possibilities for connecting with each other. It only took 51 cents.

You see, I was sitting outside of the giant gift shop in Yosemite Village, eating ice cream with my kids. In our family, we've got a long-standing tradition of getting one of those flattened penny souvenirs from lots of places we visit, and they were asking for one now. Unfortunately, I didn't have any change with me, so I had to say no. I didn't realize that not too far away, another gentleman was watching and listening to this conversation play out. But about ten minutes after this conversation, as we were getting ready to head out, this same man came up to me, with 51 cents. He said that he had overheard my conversation with my kids, and went out to his car to see if he had any loose change, and returned with exactly what I needed to make my kids' day.

It was a seemingly small act, but it held a world (and apparently the kernel of a high holy day sermon) in it. **Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to recommit ourselves to human kindness and human connection. To recognizing, appreciating, and honoring *our own* humanity and the humanity of others.**

In the opening pages of her book *Caste*, Isabel Wilkerson describes a photograph of a large gathering of workers from Nazi Germany, taken in 1936. In it, nearly every single worker is giving the Nazi salute, with the exception of one man, standing with his arms crossed and a stern expression on his face. His name is believed to have been August Landmesser, and he had joined the Nazi Party some years earlier. But by the time of this photograph, despite the swirling Nazi propaganda that the Jews were *Untermenschen*, subhuman, Landmesser knew otherwise, that they were as human as anyone else. You see, he was an Aryan in love with a Jewish woman, but the recently enacted Nuremberg Laws had made their relationship illegal. As Wilkerson explains,

His personal experience and close connection to the scapegoated caste allowed him to see past the lies and stereotypes so readily embraced by susceptible members -- the majority, sadly -- of the dominant caste. Though Aryan himself, his openness to the humanity of the people who had been deemed beneath him gave him a stake in their well-being, their fates tied to his. He could see what his countrymen chose not to see.

Wilkerson goes on to offer a challenge to her readers:

We would like to believe that we would have taken the more difficult path of standing up against injustice in defense of the outcaste. But unless people are willing to transcend their fears, endure discomfort and derision, suffer the scorn of loved ones and neighbors and co-workers and friends, fall into the disfavor of perhaps everyone they know, face exclusion and even banishment, it would be numerically impossible, humanly impossible, for everyone to be that man. What would it take to be him in any era? What would it take to be him now?

Wilkerson asks some hard questions: for whom would we be willing to risk our sense of personal safety? For whom are we responsible? What does it take for us to recognize the humanity of those who are not like us?

The modern French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, perhaps in stark contrast to this us-versus-them thinking, believed that we could actually access God when we truly look into the face of the Other -- when we engage with someone who may be very different from us, not focusing on their physical features or their Other-ness. When we sit with someone as they tell their story, when we step into interactions with kindness and compassion, we are present in each others' humanity. Whether that person across from us is a neighbor, a family member, a fellow temple member, or someone from a completely different world than our own, we take on a responsibility to acknowledge their humanity, to search for the Divine spark within them.

This is part of the work we are tasked with during the High Holy Days. Our tradition calls us to confront our own humanity and examine our relationships with ourselves and others. To ask ourselves difficult questions, to take stock of the moments when we have missed the mark, when we may have overlooked the needs or experience of someone else because we were too busy, too angry, or in too big a hurry. Or when we overlooked our own needs for the sake of a deadline or because taking time for our own self-care was too big an inconvenience. If the past year is a bit of a blur, next week, we'll recite the *Vidui*, an alphabetical list of transgressions, written in the first-person plural. It's a personal confession, recited as a community. It includes a litany of ways we may have missed the mark, both small and large. Whether we have done these things or not, we are forced to confront them, both as individuals and as a community:

Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi. We abused and abandoned, we acted without thinking...We drove away those we love with silence, we deceived and denied...We judged others rashly and wrongly...We overreached and overreacted.

When we acknowledge and own up to these shortcomings and mis-steps, we can begin the difficult process of *teshuvah*, of returning to the task of repairing our selves, our relationships, and our world. After all, the rabbis of the Mishnah teach us, "For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another; the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another."

What can we do to provide an antidote to this decline in human decency in our world? While we may not be able to repair all the brokenness in our world single-handedly, I propose we re-commit ourselves to acts of human kindness in this new year. Certainly, this pandemic has taught us how truly interdependent and interconnected to each other we humans really are. In *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of our Ancestors, Rabbi Shimon the Righteous teaches that the world stands on three things: on Torah, on worship, and on *gimilut chasadim tovim*, acts of lovingkindness. I've always appreciated this list - the first two are largely personal religious and spiritual commitments, but the third -- acts of lovingkindness -- is about action, it requires that we go beyond ourselves to engage with our world. At its core *chesed* is about more than just kindness - it's about a reciprocal love and care that grows out of being part of a covenantal relationship. This year, I want to challenge each of us to engage in 100 Acts of Kindness. I know it may sound like a lot, but it's only two acts per week. Here's a brief list, to get you started.

Start small:

- hold a door open for someone,

- make a little extra space for that other car to merge into your lane,
- Say please and thank you (not just because they're polite, but as acknowledgment of the person-ness of others)
- Give someone the benefit of the doubt,
- Offer someone a hug, or a shoulder to cry on, or a listening ear,
- Give a stranger 51 cents.

And don't forget about being a little more kind to yourself:

- Take a walk,
- Meditate,
- Take some deep breaths,
- Give yourself permission to take a risk, to make some mistakes, to not be perfect.

When you're ready, you can move on to bigger things:

- Volunteer your time with a local non-profit doing good work (check out Beth Am's Tzedek email blasts for lots of good opportunities!),
- Learn about a cause that's important to you,
- Give tzedakah,
- Prepare a meal for someone going through a hard time,
- Make a point of getting to know a new group of people, ideally folks who are not-like you.

You get the idea. What would be on your list? If you need inspiration, pick up a copy of Dete Meserve and Rachel Greco's inspiring book *Random Acts of Kindness*, which recounts all sorts of kindnesses, both big and small, across lines of age, faith, gender, and financial differences. Keep a list of what you've accomplished. I'd love to hear what you're up to! I invite you to share your acts of kindness with me. **You can email me directly, or create a post and tag @CongregationBethAm on Facebook (or @congbetham on Instagram), with the #100ActsofChesed.**

We live in a world desperately in need of more human care and kindness, inspired by the lessons we've learned from the past year and a half of this pandemic. In a recent Jewel for Elul - a daily email digest that's part of my own spiritual preparation for the High Holy Days - Rabbi Rachel Timoner reflected on her last moments with her father. As she sat by her dying father's bedside, her son asked him, "Poppop, do you have advice for how I should live my life?" Her father closed his eyes and opened them again, and responded, "Respect people you don't know and love people you do." These High Holy Days call us to carefully consider our own humanity and acknowledge the humanity of others. What better way to start a new year than with acts of *chesed* - acts of kindness, respect, and compassion.

Shanah Tovah U'metukah. May this be a good and sweet new year, full of new avenues for bringing kindness into our world.