

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5780
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We were so sorry to hear about the death of your grandmother.
Hoping time will heal your heart a bit.
May her memory always be for a blessing.

Each card had versions of the same thing written inside. *And*, not one single card was a duplicate.

May you be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Israel.
We are thinking of you at this sad time.
There are no good words for a time like this. I hope that the love and care of your family and friends can bring you some comfort in these sad days.

Some were waiting in our home mailbox when we returned from the funeral and shiva in New York. Many more waited for me at TBO, in a pile on my desk and in my box.

This poem was given to me after a painful time and I wanted to share it with you.
Wishing your memories land a smile on your lips and heart as you reflect on your grandma.
My heart is with you as you work through your grief and learn to find solace in warm memories.

For more than a week, they kept coming. I opened and read every message. Each time, I felt a tingle of warmth rush over me. Some were from people I had

expected might write. Others came from community organizations who believe sending a card is the right thing to do when someone dies. Each day, I concluded, *that's the last one*. And then I'd get another.

I thought to myself more than once: *I didn't know that anyone actually sent condolence cards anymore*. These days we see social media posts, texts, and e-mails, and I certainly did appreciate all of those that I received. But something felt different about holding an actual card in my hand. *I'm so glad people still do this*, I said to Brian.

And then I began to calculate how many steps it took to send each card. Each person had to go and purchase the card, compose the message for the card, write the message, put a stamp on and address it, and mail it. Each step required preparation and thought; empathy and mindfulness; this small act of kindness required a great deal of intention.

We often teach our children about random acts of kindness. We encourage these acts in order to inculcate kind behavior; to emphasize the importance of doing something kind for someone else; to suggest that they can happen frequently and randomly. However, the “random” act of kindness is likely random only to the recipient, possibly because they aren't expecting it. In order to act kindly, we do

think about it beforehand. And when we practice kindness, it becomes more intentional.

In Modern Hebrew, the word for intention is *kavanah*. It is “why” we do something. In other Jewish contexts, intention is what gives us direction and purpose. The Talmud calls this *kivun libo*, translated best as “direction of [his] heart”. The debates we read in the Talmud about *kivun libo* discuss the necessity of *kavanah* in the fulfillment of mitzvot. They ask: “which is more important: to do the action or to have the right intention while doing the action?” Rav Hai Gaon concludes that not only is intention vital, but the more intent, the better!

A mishna teaches the necessity of intent, ruling that if someone happens to pass a synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and hears the shofar sounded, they do not actually fulfill the mitzvah of hearing the sound of the shofar because they heard it only incidentally, not intentionally. They did not *kivun libo*, direct their heart¹.

When bar and bat mitzvah students express concerns about “messing up” on their big day, I ask them two questions: did you put in the time and effort to prepare? (yes) Are you doing this from your heart? (yes) Then there is no such thing as messing up.

For the past four summers, I have spent two weeks of July at URJ 6 Points Sports Academy NC. At camp, we focus our days through the lens of six core

¹ Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:7

values. Each evening, bracelets with the value of the day printed on them are awarded to recognize members of the camp community who exemplified one of the values that day. The one bracelet distributed most frequently is *kavanah*.

Basketball coach Arsenio Avant painted a picture for me of what *kavanah* can look like.

“I don’t care who is the first to arrive in the gym in the morning. And I don’t care who is the last one to leave the gym in the evening. You could spend all day here and not get anything done. I care about what you do while you are here. Whether it is fifteen minutes or thirty minutes or three hours. Make the most of the time that you dedicate to bettering yourself at your sport. Don’t waste the opportunity to improve.”

Whenever I go out on the tennis court or challenge myself to complete an intense workout, I think of Coach Arsenio’s passion and commitment, and I find my *kavanah*.

At this High Holy Day season, we are given Elul, the entire month preceding Rosh Hashanah, to focus on introspection and self-evaluation. It is a time for us to consider how the person we have been compares to the person we want to be. It is a time for us to *kivun libeinu*, to direct our hearts for the year to come.

My chavruta, Rabbi Dusty Klass, and I, spent the month of Elul focusing on the choices we make each day, from the very smallest and seemingly insignificant

to the bigger choices with more far reaching impact. One morning, I decided to take my earphones out while walking the dogs so that I could notice nature and my surroundings. That simple choice enabled me to hear the rustling of the leaves in the wind, interact more with Jimmy and Annie, and see the beautiful spider webs that had cropped up over night. In short, I was able to be more present in the moment. I no longer walked through the world in “automatic” mode. I added intentionality to a simple part of my daily routine, and it led to a more meaningful experience.

At the Religious School Committee Meeting that fell during the month of Elul, each member of the committee shared a choice they had made that day. One person chose to take the high road in an e-mail confrontation, one chose let go of pressing work matters in order to be present at home with a sick child. One person chose to spend more time with family and one person chose to spend more time alone. Each person’s choice was unique to them and enabled them to participate more intentionally in their own life.

In fact, each aspect of this season offers us the opportunity to be more intentional. *Yamim Noraim*, the ten Days of Awe, that begin today, are designed specifically for us to prepare both for Yom Kippur and the year ahead. This ten day period invites us to place intentional acts of kindness front and center in our lives. These Days of Awe enable us to get ourselves ready.

When we prepare for an interview or a performance, we rehearse; we visualize what success will look like; we ask for feedback from the people closest to us. Like any new skill or initiative, intentional acts of kindness also requires practice. These acts might not be easy and it might not happen right away. And we all start at different places. Perhaps you sent a condolence card to someone this year. Or maybe you thought about it but, for various reasons, didn't get around to actually sending it. Or maybe the thought didn't even occur to you. All of those places are okay places from which to start. The key is to practice.

We are also more likely to act when we feel accountable for those actions. For some of us, holding ourselves accountable is enough. However, most of us benefit from outside influence or input. When we tell others about our goals, it can give us a different sense of responsibility and ownership. Much of the research suggests that sharing resolutions with others or writing them down for ourselves leads to a greater likelihood that we'll follow through on them.² Maybe this is because commitments feel more real when said out loud.

So what do intentional acts of kindness look like?

² <https://www.nytimes.com/guides/smarterliving/resolution-ideas>,
<https://psychology.iresearchnet.com/social-psychology/social-cognition/accountability/>

When you're thinking about someone, actually let them know!

If you want to show up to a meeting but you're not sure you want to join the group—go anyway.

If you've always wanted to study Torah but you don't know where to start, e-mail Rabbi Dinner or me and we would be happy to help you!

If a new person you meet peaks your interest, extend the conversation and go out for a cup of coffee.

If you want to pray for something or someone and you don't think you have the right words, say what's in your heart.

The more we practice, the more we will find that intentional acts of kindness become ingrained in our lives. Who knows, all of these actions could lead to someone getting a condolence card when they really need to feel like someone cares!

And just in case, like me, you appreciate physical reminders of what you intend to do, I have a small gift for each of you. On your way out of the sanctuary this morning, you will see blue rubber bracelets with the word *kavanah*, written on them. Please take one. Wear it. And use it as a tool to remind yourself to practice *intentional* acts of kindness. See if you can set a *kavanah* to do one act of kindness a day. Imagine how many acts of kindness we, in this room, could generate.

We are living in a world that needs more compassion. When we practice intentional acts of kindness, we create moments of connection. Each moment of connection adds meaning to our lives and the lives of those around us. They remind us that we *matter*. And that is the magic.