

Rabbi Daniel Berman

Rosh Hashanah Day Two 2022

Being an older brother is not a job I ever took lightly.

It's a serious matter being bigger and pretending to be wiser than these other people living in your house. Occasionally, of course, you feel like you have knowledge to offer. For example, I'd tell them: be careful - this teacher gives surprise exams; that one throws erasers at kids who aren't paying attention. Don't worry, I told them, he doesn't have good aim. You should be fine.

And through all the wisdom imparted and snacks made and rides to school given - and all the trust they offered and invitation into their lives - you build an unusual relationship, which I did not take for granted.

So when my brother came to visit me just before he graduated college, without yet having mapped out his next steps following graduation, I was ready to act like an older brother does: active listening, wise guidance, a touch of humor.

I have a very clear memory that we were sitting on the edge of the couch in Sarah's and my tiny apartment in Brooklyn on a Sunday morning when I asked him:

"So what are you going to do?"

Pause.

"Well, Jonny and I, we decided to walk."

Johnny was his best friend and kindred spirit.

“What do you mean, ‘walk?’” I asked.

“We are going to walk across the country, and as we walk we are going to be kind. We’re going to spread kindness. It seems like people could use a little more of that.”

I thought about it for a moment; my younger brother standing earnestly before me.

I would like to think I told him, “what an amazing concept” and then ask a number of follow-up questions.

That’s really interesting. Tell me more.”

I think my exact words were “huh.”

Which was actually my way of *not saying* “That is the most ridiculous idea I’ve ever heard.”

But here’s the thing: he was right. He’s always been a little ahead of the rest of us. All these years later, and especially over the last five-six years, I can’t think of anything more urgent than acts of human kindness and decency.

I wish Ben and Johnny had walked not only the country, but also the earth.

I wish I had not only encouraged them, but joined them.

Being *proactive* in kindness and generosity is exactly how our ancient rabbis imagined Abraham. It’s one of the most important reasons God chose Abraham to become the spiritual founding father of what would become the Jewish people. One of the great stories in Torah begins with Abraham sitting by the entrance of his tent. The day grew hotter and hotter. Looking up, Abraham saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, *he ran* from the entrance of the tent to greet them.

He bowed to the ground and urged them, “don’t go on. I am your servant. We’ll bring you water so you can bathe your feet and rest under the shade of the tree. And we’ll bring you bread.” Sarah, too, heard the guests, and immediately welcomed them, rushing to bake them bread and cakes.

One collection of interpretive tales called *Avot De’Rebbe Natan* expands upon this story, describing Abraham’s kindness as boundless, and suggesting that after being visited by the three men, he no longer waited for people *to come to him*. He would *go out into the world* to meet people who needed a place to stay, and he’d bring them home and give them bread, meat, and wine. He built spacious mansions and stocked them with food and drink, so that whoever came upon the mansion while traveling could eat and drink. This is just one of many rabbinic stories praising this attribute of radical kindness.

I wish I knew this story that weekend Ben came up to Brooklyn. I would have encouraged my brother to be Abraham.

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That we need to be relentlessly kind, generous, is an urgent call of these holy days.

So - without the opportunity to walk the country - what does it mean to be kind?

I’ll tell you a story. Seven and a half years ago, in the middle of the winter of 2015, I was having a hard day. Unlike, well, any other person who has ever grown up in the state of Maine, I do not like winter. My mom is Israeli, my dad is from Mattapan, so we didn’t do things like skiing and ice

fishing in the winter. We spent winter waiting for spring and eating salted fish. I was having a hard day because the winter of 2015 was the coldest, snowiest winter on record. In less than four weeks, five storms dumped almost 8 feet of snow, obliterating records. Two of the storms were among the ten largest ever recorded. The arctic weather brought an arctic chill. The temperature didn't hit forty degrees for close to two months. And this particular day, it was *bone* cold. There wasn't anywhere to put the eight snow that had already fallen, so it all just sat by the side of the road, forcing two or even three driving lanes on major streets into one lane. In addition, there was black ice, so people were driving particularly slowly.

And I was late.

Late getting home from a meeting, late picking up ingredients to make dinner for my children who were waiting for me at home. I was driving down Washington Street, in West Newton, in our old red Toyota highlander; it was a sturdy but already twelve year old car, and, not wanting to invest too much money in it, we used some low-maintenance but reliable methods to keep it in repair. In particular, you may even remember, our back windows were held up by multiple layers of black duct tape. This is an important detail in the story, by the way.

On that winter day, justifiably impatient and angry, drivers were cutting me and others off to get ahead. I was frustrated, agitated by the entire winter let alone these drivers. I became more aggressive myself, a little less mindful than I like to be of the holiness of all creation.

Now I join the fray. I start cutting others off, beeping my horn. I turn off Washington Street to enter the Trader Joe's parking lot and there are at least 20 cars waiting to pull into a single spot. I look into the window of the store and see that each check-out line is 15 people deep, and each person looks to be buying enough processed snacks to last until winter 2016.

Ok, turn off the radio. Deep breaths. Listen to your breath. Feel it expand in your lungs. Everything you've practiced during fourteen years of parenthood and five years of rabbinical school were preparing you for this moment. I was doing great.

Forty five minutes later, I am next in line to park my car and through the window of the store I can see a person checking out, closing his wallet, starting to roll the cart of groceries towards the exit. He is moving a little slowly, but he comes out, I am feeling heroic. I'm so patient. Look what I've done here, me with my breathing techniques.

He places his groceries in his car, and pulls out a couple of snacks he has purchased. That's nice, I thought. I should remember to do that, too, so I won't be so hungry when I get home.

He sits down in his car, turned on the engine and did not move. The car stayed right there.

Two minutes. Three minutes. Seven minutes.

He can't be serious. This is not real.

Now my breathing is speeding up again. I start coming up with things to say to him.

I angle my car in so I can see him, and as I begin to roll down my window, he gets out of his car and comes over to stand next to my driver's side. I was ready.

“Hi,” he says calmly, gently. “You’re the rabbi at Reyim,” right?

I’m now dumbstruck and can barely stutter, “yes. How did you know that?”

“I play bridge there and I often see your car parked in the rabbis’ spot.”

“Huh,” I managed to say. “How do you know it’s *this* car?”

“The windows,” he said. “The duct tape kind of gives it away.”

“Oh yeah,” I managed to say. “Yes, that’s me.”

“I’m glad you stopped,” he said. “I want to give you my phone number. If you ever need someone to make a minyan so a member can say kaddish, give me a call. I’ll be there.”

“Thank you,” I was barely able to muster.

He turned around, walked slowly so as to not slip on the ice, sat down in his car and then backed out.

It was such a jarring exchange of pure kindness at a moment when I was feeling so hostile.

Now I would love to tell you that I went into Trader Joes and treated everyone kindly and kindness spread and spread, rippling throughout the store.

But I just drove home. For two days until the roads opened again, we had cereal and milk for dinner.

It occurred to me as I drove home that many of the people at Trader Joes were buying groceries for their families after aggravating days at work where they are trying to do something good in the world, as their parents had taught them. Some probably lost parents or partners in the past month and were thinking about them as they stood in line waiting to check out, maybe even worried about missing evening minyan to say kaddish.

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In a talk that I attended last year, the speaker was sharing his concern that we are suffering from the lack of moral leadership. The challenges are self-evident, he said: degradation in public discourse, the peddling of fear and hate, the attacks on our institutions of democracy, the blurring of lines between dissent and disloyalty, between conflict and abuse, between truth and untruth. Our fears, he said, far outweigh our hopes. Our anger and resentment have overtaken our kindness.

I think many of us agree - at least with the feeling of exhaustion from conflict and violence he was gesturing towards, and its serious impact on mental and emotional health. But I *disagree* that fear and anger have overpowered our hope and kindness and acts of grace. There are acts of kindness all around us, all the time.

People everywhere are caring for their children in the morning, their parents in the afternoon, and their children again in the evening, falling asleep for a few hours and doing it again the next day and month and year. Others are spending time with friends who need a listening companion and driving them to their appointments at Dana Farber - or giving tzedakah when they learn someone is in need.

These acts of kindness change us and they are grounded in faith.

Still, the kindness and the decency that is so urgently needed is not just a matter of how we act alone. Kindness is an existential issue. What if we believe that our *entire purpose* is to be kind, gentle, generous and giving? How does that change who you are and what you prioritize? This

purpose comes from a spiritual place: gratitude and humility for the gift of being alive, conscious that we don't own this gift, we only borrow it, and then we give it away to others to remember.

Kindness is not in our deeds alone; it is also the purpose of a human life.

So much of Judaism is built upon this spiritual posture. Kindness, graciousness, and decency are what we call sacred qualities. Sacred because God is the Source of *chen, chesed v'rachamin*, grace, kindness and compassion.

Mah doresh Adonai mim'cha? asks the prophet Micah. *What does God demand of you? Ki im asot mishpat, v'ahavat chesed, v'hatzne'ah lechet im Elohecha* – “To do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

There are pages of Talmud written about the religious significance of kindness. Our ancient rabbis teach that kindness is even greater than tzedakah. Tzedakah is done with money, kindness with our humanity. Tzedakah is done for the poor, kindness for everyone. Tzedakah is for the living.

Kindness is to those who are living and those who have died. ¹

Kindness has an energy to it that makes a difference in communities. Discussion is elevated. We see and acknowledge others' goodness and express gratitude. We are patient and understanding when others are making mistakes. And even in time of conflict, a posture of kindness and generosity *allows us to see the good in others.*

¹ Bavli Sukkah 49B

A mentor shared with me that he developed a spiritual practice of kindness that has transformed his life. When someone is treating him unkindly, speaking to him harshly, he imagines that person in a hospital bed. The person is suddenly vulnerable, speaking from a place of pain, and the work becomes to listen compassionately. It is a transformational practice that is grounded in ancient Jewish thought.

השתדל להיות איש במקום שאין אנשים, taught Hillel in a pirkei avot, an ancient rabbinic collection of texts. In a place lacking in humanity, *strive* to be human.

Human means we're going to make mistakes and be impatient and wish we had acted or responded differently. That is for certain, probably even later today before the end of the holiday. "*L'hishtadel*" - *striving to be human* means we're willing to make mistakes and be in relationship *anyway*.

Who knows, maybe someday we will celebrate the end of the pandemic by walking across the country and spreading kindness. Or even just remember the troubles of the person who is taking so long to check out or drive off.

Or we simply tell *each other* today through Yom Kippur how much we appreciate their many gifts, and forgive their many mistakes. Our tradition is clear: we cannot turn to God until we have first turned to each other. Then we can be *kehilat* Reyim again - after years apart and a lot of change, we can be a community of dear, trusted friends who know you are not only welcome, but loved here in our *little island of kind*.

L'shanah tovah u'metukah.