

PRACTICING COMPASSION: SHABBAT SHUVAH
KOL EMETH - OCTOBER 1, 2011
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Shakespeare said that all the world's a stage and all the men and women merely players. The Talmud offers its own pithy summary of the nature of life, as I discovered some years ago, studying with Rabbi Lewis, saying that the world is like a "*bei hilula*" - a wedding hall. I want to suggest that the world is surely one big wedding hall, and it is also a funeral home and a house of shiva.

The seed for this Dvar Torah was planted after a family tragedy last month, when my first cousin, Robbie, 57 years old, flew to Minnesota to visit my mother, who had recently moved into an assisted living center near our home after her health had declined precipitously. Robbie and his wife Carol, both remarkably kind and generous human beings, had often hosted my mother at their home and shul outside of Philadelphia, serving as surrogate adult children for her since I lived far away. Robbie and Carol had not seen my mother since her move to St. Paul, so they came and had a wonderful weekend visit together. Heading home, at the Minneapolis airport, Robbie suffered a massive stroke, from which he never awoke. He died a week later.

The day after his death, during the day and a half when our shul had arranged for shomrim to be with my cousin's body between his death and his burial, I was on my way to the funeral home to do my own two-hour shift. I got a little lost on the way to the funeral home, and I arrived nearly 10 minutes late for my shift. "Oh no," I thought to myself, "how awful" - the good-hearted person who had the shift before mine would have to stay late because I was arriving late. And then suddenly, getting out of the car, I knew - - not even yet knowing

which kind person it was - - that she wouldn't mind. I knew that whoever had taken that shift had volunteered for it out of a deep sense of compassion, and a willingness to spend time in the silent presence of death. That person had been sitting for two hours in a sacred space of awe and lovingkindness. In that context, I knew that my being a few minutes late wouldn't matter.

A prayer arose in me in that moment. "This is the world I want to live in," I thought, a world in which brief delays, small inconveniences, and the ordinary irritations of life don't matter. This would be a world in which everyone, aware of the fragility of life, lived out of a place of deep compassion, gentleness, and patience. In such a world, we wouldn't have to worry about small offenses and frustrations. We could trust that others would be gentle and patient with us, and that we would do the same with others, in a self-reinforcing web of kindness. We would all touch each other with tender compassion, remembering that we are in this human predicament together.

When the Talmud says that the world is a "*bei hilula*," a wedding hall, it means that there is a lot of joy in the world. One Hasidic master (R. Hanech Henech M'Alexander) imagines a person moving from a small town in Poland to the big city of Warsaw. The first night in his new home, he saw what was obviously a wedding across the street. On the next night, to his surprise, there was another wedding in the same house. And on the third night, yet again. "How many daughters does this guy have?," he thought.

Neighbors eventually informed him that the house across the street was a wedding hall, and that each night a different bride and groom came to celebrate.

The whole world is a wedding hall, and the Master of the Universe invites us to come in and celebrate. Somewhere on the peninsula, I'm sure, there are weddings today. We can choose to bring our hearts to the sheer joy of some unknown bride and groom starting a new life together today, to parents weeping with joy, to a community of family and friends - - somewhere - - for whom, today, it seems that everything is possible. We can choose to enter into their simcha, even sight unseen, and in so doing, to refresh our own spirits.

So, too, all the world is a funeral home, or a house of shiva. Flying home from my cousin's funeral in Pennsylvania, I wondered how many people on the plane I was on had, like me, just suffered a heart-wrenching loss. How many parents on that one small airplane had lost a child? How many people had recently lost a best friend, a life partner, or a beloved parent? How many people were in pain, in need of extra kindness? I cannot know who or how many, but surely I was not the only one.

What would it mean to live out the insight that everywhere we turn there are people with pain in their hearts? While it may seem grim to put it this way, it would mean carrying ourselves much the way we do at a house of *shiva*. We would wait for others to speak, putting their needs ahead of our own. We would be on the lookout for someone who needs a hand, a loving word, or a bite to eat. We would move slowly and speak gently, invite others to go ahead of us in line, think of affirming things to say, and come home treasuring the people we love all the more. Because that is what naturally happens in us when, as in the funeral home and the house of *shiva*, we are grounded in compassion, focused on the truth of human vulnerability, and filled with gratitude for the precious and finite lives we live.

For many years, I have observed, in many shuls where I have spent time during the High Holidays throughout my adult life, that something similar happens during the chagim. It seems that the compassion quotient in shul is significantly higher during this sacred season – and not just at a place as normally loving as Kol Emeth. People seem to greet one another not pro forma but with greater urgency and affection, with real kavannah in their wishes of “shana tova” to one another. As if we are carrying with us a higher-than-usual measure of gratitude for having lived another year, and a greater-than-usual awareness that there is little we can do to control who will live and who will die in the year to come. This heightened measure of awareness of our shared human vulnerability breeds a reflective humility, infusing our greetings to one another with extra kindness and meaning.

To put this in the categories of the traditional Mussar movement, there are certain middot – qualities of soul – that we are to cultivate every day of our lives, and that are especially central to our teshuvah practice during these Aseret Y’mei Teshuvah. These qualities, so vividly and instinctively present in the shiva home, include:

- Death-awareness – remembering that our lives are precarious, unpredictable, and finite;
- Gratitude for the good in our lives – and for life itself;
- Compassion, born of the awareness that everyone we meet lives that same fragile, challenged life that we do;
- Kindness – the desire to comfort others in their pain, and a recognition that nothing is more important than contributing to the well-being of other people.
- Humility – knowing that there is little we can do in the face of life’s tragedies, and that the little things - - small acts of kindness - - do matter.

I don't, of course, mean to diminish the importance of the work of *cheshbon hanefesh* - - the rigorous self-examination that is the heart of this sacred season for us, the calling to mind of our personal sins, faults, and chronic harmful patterns of living. But I want to suggest that what underlies all of that work - what supports and enables the work of *cheshbon hanefesh* is these very basic qualities of soul - gratitude, compassion, kindness, and humility.

Like the woman at the funeral home who instantly forgave me for keeping her waiting a bit past her assigned shift of sh'mira time, the practice of these middot focuses us on what is important and what is not. With gratitude for life and the centrality of compassion in our mind and heart, many of the angers and resentments we carry, and the hurts we have endured in the past year, actually don't matter so much. Any irritation or judgment that will melt next time we are standing together at the funeral home or at the cemetery - - is actually not so important right now either. The practice of these qualities opens kind and forgiving places in our hearts. From this state of mind and heart, it is much easier to examine our own sins of the year gone by, to forgive ourselves and vow to do better in the year to come, and to forgive others for their wrong-doing against us.

On yom tov, we return again and again to the first articulation of the middot - in God. "*Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun, erech apayim* O God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, *v'rav chesed ve-emet*, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, *notzeir chesed la-alafim*, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, *nosei avon vafesha v'chata-ah v'nakeih*. forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. The tradition never blames us for failing to embody these middot completely. Truly, not even God does that all the time. But the tradition does teach us that to be created in the image of God is to constantly work

to emulate the traits of God, to live in such a way that we bring more compassion, grace, kindness, truthfulness, and forgiveness into the world.

What does this look like on a daily basis? We do this by practicing kind speech and deep listening in our own intimate relationships, in our homes, and in our home community, where we have boundless opportunities every day to practice being kind to one another - - or the opposite. We emulate divine traits when we look beyond our immediate circle, actively looking for opportunities to offer words and acts of love to those in need of comfort.

We practice these middot when we remember the humanity of all the people with whom we come in contact on a daily basis. This includes all the people you encounter during an ordinary weekday: the people at your work place, if you are lucky enough to have one; the people at the grocery store, the dry cleaners, the gas station. This includes the people you frequently find irritating – the annoying relatives, the person on the other end of the phone at your internet provider or your insurance company, the painfully slow driver ahead of you or the proverbial telemarketer. Try asking yourself: which of these people have recently suffered a traumatic loss, and are using all they have just to get through this day? How can I practice kindness, patience, forgiveness, with this real person standing before me right now? And, at least as challenging, how can I practice these states of mind with myself?

This is not about berating ourselves every time we fail to live up to a super-human standard of righteousness. Rather, it's about setting a *kavannah*, a sacred intention, to regularly cultivate our capacity for compassion, kindness, and graciousness in the places where these qualities come easily to us, to stretch where they do not; and when we fall short, which we will, to pray for another day to practice some more.

And lest you think that this kind of awareness, grounded in awareness of our mortality, would drain the joy out of life, I suggest that the opposite is the case. How many times have you stood at a graveside filled with gratitude for the ones you love, along with sadness for the mourners around you? How many times have you turned from a frightening news report and hugged your kids (or picked up the phone to hear their voices)? Awareness of human fragility is the most powerful way to cultivate deep gratitude and appreciation of life.

So, I wish all of you a shana tova, a new year suffused with joy, love, good health and blessing. I would love to think that none of us will have heartbreak in our families in the year to come. But it is possible that we will, and that knowledge can inspire us all to a life of greater kindness and wisdom, and to pour more compassion into our troubled world. Shabbat Shalom and shana tova.