

Chen Va Chesed: A Return To Grace, Compassion and Kindness

Rabbi Israel Salanter was the founder of the Mussar movement, which promoted the idea that religious study must be accompanied by strictly ethical behavior. There is a story about one day when he boarded a train to travel to the town of Vilna for an extended visit with his son-in-law. He settled into his seat and next to him sat a young man who was quite rude.

The rabbi began humming loudly to himself. The young man complained, and the rabbi obliged him by sitting in silence. The rabbi opened a window. This time the young man complained that the compartment was too cold, and the rabbi obliged him by closing the window. And so the train ride continued, the young man going on about one thing after another, voicing his complaints disrespectfully, and the rabbi going out of his way to comply with the young man's demands. Whatever the young man asked, the rabbi gave him. The fellow, of course, had no idea that the man sitting next to him was a rabbi, let alone the great Rabbi Israel Salanter.

When the train arrived at the station in Vilna, the entire Jewish community was there to greet Rabbi Salanter. The young fellow saw the reception being given to the man who had sat next to him on the train. "Who is that man?" he asked.

"That is the great sage Israel Salanter," someone replied.

The young man's face fell. Suddenly he was ashamed of his horrid behavior. He knew that an apology was called for, so he made an effort to find out where the rabbi was staying.

The next day the young man went to the rabbi's son-in-law's house and knocked on the door. To his surprise, Rabbi Salanter was the one who answered. Immediately the fellow launched into his apology. "I didn't know who you were. I'm so very sorry," he said.

Rabbi Salanter forgave him, which, frankly, is what we would expect of a sage, forgiving someone even if the person has wronged him in some way. Clearly, the behavior of the young man was wrong-there was no excuse for it-but the rule is that if someone wrongs you and apologizes, you're not supposed to be hardheaded about it; you are supposed to say "forgiven" and that is exactly what the great rabbi said.

But Rabbi Salanter went further. He asked the young man what had brought him to Vilna. When he found out that the young man was looking to be trained as a

shocheit, a ritual slaughterer of meat, the rabbi connected him with a teacher who would train him in the laws of shechita.

After a number of months of training, the young man was ready to find work. And, with the help of Rabbi Salanter and his son-in-law, he was able to find a job in a nearby village. Before he left Vilna, the young man went to Rabbi Salanter to say goodbye to him and thank him for all that he had done.

"You're welcome," the rabbi said. "We wish you success and hope that everything will be good for you."

"Before I go, I have a question to ask you," the young man said.

"By all means," the rabbi replied.

"When I behaved the way that I did on the train and asked you forgiveness, you forgave me. That I understand. In retrospect I realized that that's what we're supposed to do when somebody asks for forgiveness. But after all that I had done to you and the way I behaved towards you, I don't understand why you didn't just leave it at that. You forgave me, *but then you went out of your way to help me. Why?*"

Rabbi Salanter said to him, "Now that is a good question. And I will tell you exactly why I did what I did. You see, it is human nature. When you asked me for forgiveness, I forgave you with my full heart. It was with no hesitation and with no holding back. However, human nature being what it is, when somebody wrongs you- as you did me- there is a residue of ill feeling in the heart. Something remains, and that's not healthy. It's not good to have such feelings. And I know that the only way to get rid of such ill will is by doing good for the other person. So I resolved that if there was any way in which I could help you, I would help myself through the process of helping you. You see? Helping you helped me rid my heart of any residue of ill feelings that I had.¹

What is interesting to me about this story is not just that Rabbi Salanter ultimately forgave the individual, but while they were on the train, each time the young man complained or was rude, Salanter demonstrated a level of grace and kindness that did not seem to be "deserved." And later, Rabbi Salanter really went above and beyond, going out of his way to help the young man. Some of us when we are "wronged" are able to forgive. But most of us wouldn't then consider actually going so far as to do something particularly kind for the person that "wronged" us.

¹ Becker, Three Times Chai, 85-87

Perhaps the story is aspirational, but it seems that these days, when it comes to kindness, many individuals are having trouble mustering the bare minimum required to function as a society, let alone to thrive as a sacred one. Though this may be quite an overgeneralization, I think it is reasonable to say that over the past number of decades something has gone terribly wrong in American society, in the Jewish community, and perhaps globally. We have accepted a world in which people have become *mean* to one another.

In recent years, author and commentator David Brooks has spent time writing about two persistent questions. His first question: why have Americans become so sad? The second question: why have Americans become so mean?

In a 2023 article in *The Atlantic*², he wrote:

I was recently talking with a restaurant owner who said that he has to eject a customer from his restaurant for rude or cruel behavior once a week—something that never used to happen. A head nurse at a hospital told me that many on her staff are leaving the profession because patients have become so abusive. At the far extreme of meanness, hate crimes rose in 2020 to their highest level in 12 years. In 2000, two-thirds of American households gave to charity; in 2018, fewer than half did. The words that define our age reek of menace: *conspiracy, polarization, mass shootings, trauma, safe spaces....*

²<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2023/09/us-culture-moral-education-formation/674765/>

Brooks reflects on all of this, and offers some possible explanations for what he describes as “the rise of hatred, anxiety, and despair.”

- *The technology story*: Social media is driving us all crazy.
- *The sociology story*: We've stopped participating in community organizations and are more isolated.
- *The demography story*: America, long a white-dominated nation, is becoming a much more diverse country, a change that has millions of white Americans in a panic.
- *The economy story*: High levels of economic inequality and insecurity have left people afraid, alienated, and pessimistic.”

While Brooks agrees that each one of these stories tells part of the story, he thinks the “deepest” reason is something else. He writes:

“The most important story about why Americans have become sad and alienated and rude, I believe, is also the simplest: We inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration. Our society has become one in which people feel licensed to give their selfishness free rein.”

What do you think? Do you agree with Brooks' explanation? Have you also seen a decline in kindness and consideration, and an increase of selfishness?

This is a very relevant issue for us to consider on Rosh Hashana, when we are asked to do *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, reflecting on what kind of people we want to be, and *teshuvah*, a return to our best selves.

Although our Rosh Hashana prayers may seem primarily focused on themes of judgement, creation, and forgiveness, we can also find the values of kindness and empathy embedded in the liturgy of these sacred days.

When we recite the thirteen *midot*, the thirteen attributes of God, we call God “*rachum v’chanun*,” compassionate and gracious. And we call God “*rav chesed*,” filled with kindness. These descriptions are not just meant to help us understand God; rather, we are being given an instruction here. Just as God is compassionate, filled with grace and kindness, so too must we strive to be in our daily interactions with others.

Compassion also finds its way into our Haftarah for today, taken from the prophet Jeremiah, where God promises to continue to treat tribes that had been exiled with grace, (עֲלֵי־כֶן מְשַׁכְּתִיָּה חֶסֶד) promising to return them and “build them firmly again; so that when “*they come with weeping, **with compassion** I will guide them, I will lead them to streams of water, by a level road where they will not stumble.*” In other words, the prophet is teaching that God’s grace and compassion lead to a return, lead to stability. And by extension, we must show grace and compassion to people who are “stumbling” in order to bring stability into our society.

Where to begin? There are so many things, it seems, that people are angry about these days. Whether we are speaking about the multi-front war that Israel has been fighting and the toll that it has taken in Gaza and in Israel, or the political landscape in our own country and the divisions and distances that seem impossible to bridge- everyone seems pretty miserable, pretty angry, and not in any kind of mood to be *gracious, compassionate, and kind*.

Here's a small example of what I mean: I was at the corner of my street a few months ago, early in the morning, waiting to turn onto Monmouth Road. There was a car in front of me and a car behind me. The person in the car behind me honked, the person in front of me was trying to make a left onto Monmouth in the summer (not easy). But since the driver in the first car could not see the honking car behind my van, he thought that I was the one who honked, and he proceeded to open his car door, lean out, turn back to me, and start screaming and yelling because he thought that I was trying to hurry him up. He was angry and frustrated, the person behind me was clearly in a rush and feeling impatient, and clearly no one was in the mood to show anyone any compassion or grace- all over someone honking.

From small moments like this, to bigger moments – the way that customers treat wait staff in restaurants, teenagers working the beach in the summer, grocers

working at the store – I have noticed, more often than in previous years, that people are on edge, they are agitated, and certainly not going out of their way to be empathetic and kind to others, especially if and when they feel someone else is in their way or has wronged them in any way.

Part of this has to do with an inability to truly “see” one another. It’s hard when someone is treating us with anger, frustration, or annoyance, to recognize that this is often coming from a place of hurt, anguish and pain.

We see this in the Torah’s story of the binding of Isaac that we read this morning. Isaac never really recovers from this traumatic event, when his father was about to sacrifice him to God. Indeed a few chapters later, in Genesis 27, when Isaac sends Esau out to hunt and prepares to offer Jacob, his oldest and favorite, the first-born blessing, the Torah tells us that Isaac’s eyes were (וַתִּכְהֶינָּה עֵינָיו מֵרָאִת) “too dim to see.”

Dr. Tal Becker, from the Hartman Institute shares his perspective on this story:

Abraham’s inability to see his son[’s trauma when he believed his father was about to sacrifice him] produced the son who was unable to see.
When you are not seen, you become less capable of seeing.

In other words, it is our inability to see others that leads *to their* inability to see.

This blindness and lack of empathy is, unfortunately, contagious. We often

struggle to truly see those who are “other.” We struggle to have compassion and empathy for their experiences. And at the same time, others often fail to truly see us, fail to recognize our pain and struggles. This cycle has led to a rise in selfishness and allowed apathy to become the norm. Our blindness leads to moral collapse.

Often what could be described by some as selfishness is rooted in a very understandable place. There are many reasons for us to feel fearful and angry about a whole host of things. We are fearful about the economy, about security and safety, and about the uncertain future in store for our children and grandchildren. We are angry at the toxic political climate and often sure that we know “who to blame.”

But fear and anger are not a strategy for creating a sacred society. Indeed fear and anger are completely counterproductive to the sacred task of these Days of Awe, in which we are called to renew our souls, seek forgiveness, and live up to the best versions of ourselves possible.

In other words, when we are afraid, when we are angry, we, like Isaac before us, can become blind. Perhaps, like Isaac, we have a good reason to be angry

and in pain. It is of course critically important that we take care of our mental, physical, and spiritual selves. Because if we are angry, and in pain, and fail to do anything productive about it; then we will be both miserable and unable to be empathic towards the anger and pain of others. When we fail to recognize the pain of others, when we are unable to see the anguish in our fellow human beings, it becomes virtually impossible to show compassion, care and kindness towards them. We simply have no bandwidth as individuals, and as a society. And so, we remain stuck.

How to get unstuck?

First, we must remember that one of our most central pieces of liturgy begins with the word *Shema*, *listen*. *Shema Yisrael*- listen, Israel. As the Koren Siddur explains: *Judaism is a religion of the ear rather than the eye*. Or as the old joke quips, God gave us two ears and one mouth, so that we would listen more than we would talk.

This does not always come so easily for many people. Many of us, myself included, love to talk, and want to be listened to and heard. But we're not always so great at giving others this same opportunity - to be listened to and heard.

This is a mistake. All of us know this, intellectually. When one of our friends, or a family member, or community member is upset about something; if we can just simply listen to them, receive what they have to say, the pressure they are feeling is often relieved. When someone seems so angry, or is acting in ways that are mean, and hurtful, can we take the time to step back and recognize that this is likely someone who is expressing their pain.

Granted, this is not always possible. And certainly, when pain is directed at us it is easy to feel uncomfortable, angry, and hurt. But if we can learn to receive one another; to listen with *chen*, grace, and show *chesed*, compassion- then, perhaps, we will be on the road to bringing more of those qualities into the world that we all share.

Not easy, and not always possible- but it starts with a willingness to listen to someone who is in pain, who is scared, angry. This may even take the form of listening to someone on “the other side” – something that after a while will help us all realize *that there is no other side*- there's just another human being in front of us, who, just like us, is waiting to be seen, and heard, and valued.

Second, we must remember that while listening is the place to start, it is simply not enough. If we want to live in a world with more grace, more empathy, more kindness- we need to *practice* exercising that muscle. Think back to the story I started with, the story of Rabbi Salanter who not only forgave the man who treated him with disrespect, but also went out of his way to treat this man with kindness.

When was the last time that you did something kind for someone else- without expectation of recognition or reward? Opportunities abound- each and every day, but we must be on the lookout for them. Being kind is one of the most important things that we can do, for ourselves, and for others. Author Henry James once said that, *"Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind."* But kindness doesn't just happen- it has to be practiced, routinely.

Sometimes, being kind does not take all that much. It just takes a willingness to do something nice for others. But other times, the Jewish notion of *chesed* means going above and beyond. Our matriarch, Rebekah, is often regarded by our sages as the paradigm of kindness. She was praised not just for simple acts of kindness, but for going *out of her way* to carry water for Abraham's

servant, and for his ten camels (hundreds of gallons on her shoulders, if we do the math).

Yes, opening a door is kind, and letting someone in front of us in traffic is kind, and smiling at the cashier is kind. But the real challenge comes when we push ourselves to “go out of our way” for others without expectation of reward or thanks.

The journalist Julian Borger wrote a book describing the harrowing journey of his father who, along with seven other Viennese children, was rescued from the clutches of the Nazi's by during WWII by individuals in London who took them in after seeing advertisements in the Manchester Guardian requesting help. The advertisement that ultimately led to the children's rescue read simply: *I seek a kind person who will educate my intelligent boy, aged 11, Viennese, of good family.*” Talk about a kindness that requires one to go out of their way. Can you imagine the kindness of strangers, during war time, who would go from reading a basic advertisement to taking in Jewish orphans from a war?

Or, to take an entirely different example, but also demonstrative of going out of our way to help another.

Rabbi David Wolpe told the following story about his father, Gerald. Gerald's father died when he was just 11 years old. Gerald, an only child, bore much of the grief alone. Following his father's death, he started walking to synagogue early each morning to join the minyan and say kaddish.

At the end of his first week of saying kaddish, the shammas of the synagogue, named Mr. Einstein, walked past Gerald's home right at the moment he was leaving to walk to minyan. Mr. Einstein, an older man, greeted him and explained, "Your home is on the way to the synagogue. I thought it might be fun to have some company. That way, I don't have to walk alone."

For a year the young Wolpe and Mr. Einstein walked through the New England seasons, the humidity of summer and the snow of winter. They talked about life and loss and for a while Gerald was not so alone.

Years later, Gerald was married and had become a father. On a visit to his childhood home, Gerald called Mr. Einstein, now well into his nineties, and asked if he would like to meet his new wife and child. Mr. Einstein agreed, but said that in view of his age, Wolpe would have to come to him.

The journey was long and complicated. For the first time, Gerald realized that Mr. Einstein's home was fully twenty minutes away, by car! He drove in tears as he realized what Mr. Einstein had done for him. ***He had walked for an hour to my home every morning so that I would not have to be alone...***By the simplest of gestures, the act of caring, he took a frightened child and led him with confidence and with faith back into life."

So where do we begin on this Rosh Hashanah? Where do we begin during this season where we are asked to “do better,” to help re-create the world by re-creating ourselves? How do we turn ourselves into people who incorporate this type of kindness and compassion into our lives on a regular basis?

We can start with a simple question: who needs my help today? But then the real challenge is to move beyond that. The real challenge is to find ways to go above and beyond with kindness, compassion, and care. Imagine what it would look like if every one of us woke up each day and alongside our own schedules and calendars and to-do lists asked: “What act of *chesed*, of kindness and compassion, can I do today?” This alone can combat the fear, intolerance, pain, and division that threaten to take us all down.

And here I want to add a word about the term that often goes with *chesed*, kindness, and that is *chen*, grace. When we call God “*rachum v’ chanun*,” compassionate and filled with grace, I think we are saying that God goes beyond compassion, and treats us with an extra level of care. And God does this whether we deserve it or not.

This too is an instruction for us, as beings made in God's image. The kindness and compassion that we show others does not necessarily have to be “earned,” it does not always have to be “quid pro quo.” We should be filled with grace, striving to be generous with others **whether they deserve it, or not.**

The question is **not** always one of equity and justice; it is **not** always about whether my grace, compassion and kindness has been earned. Sometimes, it is about the kind of person **that I want to be**; the world that **I want to create**; the way that **I want to come** before God on these Yamim Noraim, these Awesome Days, and every day in-between.

The world is raging. People are incredibly angry. We have reason to be scared, many reasons. But we have even more reason to bring our light into the darkness. Let us strive to listen, to practice radical kindness, to decide each and every morning, what kind of person we want to become. Do we want to be angry, and bitter, and filled with ego and self-pity; **or** do we want to be joyful, peaceful, filled with love and a desire to show empathy, grace and compassion towards others. That doesn't mean that we have to agree with one another; but it does mean that we have to be willing to lead with open arms, and not closed fists.

Maimonides once taught that “the purpose of all of the laws of the Torah is to bring mercy, loving-kindness, **and peace** upon the world.”³ *Peace cannot come, until compassion and kindness are present.* If we want things to look different – in America, in Israel, in the world; if we want there to be peace with our community, our family, and among our friends; we must take actions that will enable us to remember our purpose. We must do teshuvah, and work to create a world that is kinder, gentler, and filled with a grace that we ask for so often, but do not demonstrate nearly enough. L'Shanah Tovah.

³ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Shabbat 2:3*