

Sermon: Handle with Care
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I recently received a story about a teacher, who, at the start of the school year, sent a note to all of the parents of the students in her class. Among the important information regarding supplies, calendar, and curriculum, there was a section in the letter that she called: “Handle with Care.” Here, the teacher wrote the following: ‘If your family is experiencing difficulties at home, I would like to provide additional support at school. I understand that you are not always able to share details and that’s okay. If your child is coming to school after a difficult night, morning or weekend, please just text me the words: “Handle with Care.” Nothing else will be said or asked. This will just let me know that your child may need extra time, patience, or help during the day.’

Such a beautiful message. Genuine care goes a long way, particularly during these times. Reading the story, the rabbi-in-me made me think of the Jewish tradition of mourners wearing a torn black ribbon following the loss of a loved one. While the gesture is certainly a personal one – acknowledging an individual’s own loss – it also happens to be communal. For, when someone who knows about this tradition encounters a person wearing a *keriah* ribbon, they are immediately made aware that this person is in mourning....that they should be mindful about how they encounter them....that they should “Handle with Care.”

I recall these instances of interpersonal sensitivity as we all continue to navigate life with Covid. Looking back upon almost three years of uncertainty, change, and loss, I think it is impossible to overstate the impact that living during a global pandemic has had on all of us. Indeed, this past week, it likely didn’t come as a surprise to anyone when an advisory group of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services issued a draft recommendation that all adult patients under the age of 65 should be screened for anxiety. In truth, not only medical experts, but also our own hearts would tell us that, these days especially, most of us would benefit from an extra measure of care, understanding, and patience.

And yet, a careful look around reveals that, despite our being worn down, or, more likely because of it, people are leaning in the opposite direction: becoming increasingly aggressive and harsh with one another.

Journalist Sarah Lyall reported the following: ‘Nerves at the grocery store were already frayed as the pandemic slouches toward its third year when the customer arrived. He wanted Cambozola, a type of blue cheese. He had been cooped up for a long time. He scoured the dairy area. Nothing. He flagged down an employee who also did not see the cheese. He demanded that she hunt in the back and look it up in the store computer. No luck. And then,” she continued, “he lost it – another out-of-control member of the great chorus of American consumer outrage.”

When an employee at the store was asked about the incident, she answered: “Have you ever seen a grown man have a full temper tantrum because we don’t have the cheese he wants? You’re looking at someone and thinking, ‘I don’t think this is about the cheese.’”

Annabelle Cardona works in a national chain home improvement store in nearby Lowell. When asked about recent customer interactions she observed that “Customers have been super aggressive and impatient lately.” Cardona recalled that, not long ago, she found herself in a heated argument with a customer who called her incompetent after she told him that, before she could provide the right size window shades, he had to measure his windows.

Sue Miller works for a non-profit in Madison, Wisconsin. In describing her experiences, she said: ‘It’s like, instead of saying, ‘This really inconvenienced me,’ they say, ‘What the heck is wrong with you?’ It’s just on a different scale.’

It isn’t only during face-to-face encounters that people are engaging in aggressive behavior. Email, as we know, has long been ripe for negative messaging – whether intended or not. With its impersonal nature and the lack of any context provided as part of our message – such as tone of voice or physical cues – email frequently favors the curt over the courteous - oftentimes fostering misunderstanding. One academic at the University of Illinois recently noted that “with the caps-lock key and the stroke of an exclamation point, your co-worker can do the equivalent of shout at you across the office.”

Social media, as has been widely experienced, is even worse. There, everyone is given a megaphone and the permission to use it. Many of the so-called mainstream sites have become so toxic that the simple gesture of posting a comment or question has become an invitation for aggressive response. Indeed, many have chosen to sign off from a number of popular platforms. Others, when reading online articles, even refuse to scroll down to read the comment and review sections.

For years, there have been concerns regarding the rise in incivility in the United States. Weber-Shandwick, an international marketing and communications firm regularly issues reports on civility in America. Starting in the early 2000’s, these reports reveal an ongoing deterioration in our interpersonal interactions. Much of this, they report, has been due to social media use, the poisoning of our political discourse, and, of course, the tribalism that has caused people to retreat into, what Brene Brown calls, our “bunkers of certitude.”

The pandemic, unquestionably, has only made things worse. Last year, a study by U.S. News and World Report revealed that a vast majority of Americans: 9 out of 10 – believe that incivility is a serious problem, with about half of those surveyed believing the problem to be extremely serious.

The consequences of increased occurrences of negative interactions are significant. While many occur in a work or consumer environment, we all know that what happens at work, frequently

doesn't stay at work. The "Journal of Occupational Health Psychology" reports that rudeness, whether deliberate or not, has the capacity to wear a person down – affecting sleep, overall health, and quality of life. As well, studies show that our own behavior is often impacted by how we are treated. In one paper about the workplace, Portland State University found that workers who experienced or even witnessed ongoing rudeness are more likely to then engage in rude behavior themselves. Thus, what is being created is a negative feedback loop affecting people's behavior at home, at school, behind the wheel....everywhere.

Many who have been impacted in this way have decided to seek alternative employment – helping to fuel what has become known as the Great Resignation. A 2022 study found that it is in professional roles that are public-facing that we see the greatest rates of attrition.

With the capacity of our negativity to spiral beyond control, psychologists, educators, community leaders as well as religious leaders are warning against our minimizing the importance of civility by seeing it merely as a matter of bad manners. It's much more than that. They point out that, in no uncertain terms, there is a moral dimension to these daily interactions. Our behavior, they explain, reflects how we see each other and, by extension, impacts the overall societal culture that, together, we create.

Our rabbis teach that to be in the presence of another human being, is to be in the presence of God. And, therefore, they urge that our behavior reflect that awareness. While a *kriah* ribbon is traditionally worn for only a few days – thereby positively influencing how the wearer is treated - our divine image, they remind us, is something that we "wear" constantly. The only question is whether it will be recognized and then responded to.

The rabbis, of course, understood that there are times when we are going to lose our temper. Maimonides said succinctly that a person who never loses their temper is not alive. In other words, anger and frustration are part of the human condition. Our responsibility, they tell us, lies in controlling our emotions. Or, perhaps better put, if it is not possible to control our emotions, we must control our actions. In Pirkei Avot (1:15) we read that we are called upon to "*M'kabeil et kol ha'adam b'sayver panim yafot*" – "to engage others with a positive countenance." The Talmud, teaches that "when a wise person loses their temper, they also lose their wisdom." And, again in Pirkei Avot (3:11), we read that "One who publically humiliates another person – even if this person is learned in Torah and has performed righteous acts - this person loses their share in the World-to-Come."

It is also worth noting, that, in Torah, it was because Moses inappropriately lost his temper with the Children of Israel – yelling at the people and striking a rock with his staff, rather than speaking to it, as he was instructed by God – that Moses was denied entry into the Promised Land.

Appropriately for us, on this day of Rosh Hashanah, the model for repentance and the changing of one's way when it comes to rude behavior is none other than Abraham: the patriarch at the center of this morning's Torah portion.

As you may be aware, in Jewish tradition, Abraham is best known for his graciousness and his hospitality. A well-known story in the Book of Genesis – a story that we will be reading in just a few weeks' time - describes how upon seeing three strangers wandering in the desert, Abraham rushes to greet them, urges them to enter his tent, along with Sarah feeds them, refreshes them, and bids them farewell. It is during this visit that the strangers reveal to Abraham and Sarah that a son, Isaac, will be born to them. And for us, as readers, it is in these passages that we learn that the strangers are, in-fact, angels from God. Through this story, we are invited to embrace Abraham as the role model for graciousness: a person who, upon seeing strangers, treats them like angels.

Yet, according to tradition, not even Abraham was immune from losing his patience. A legend: One day, as Abraham was seated outside of his tent, he noticed, in the distance, an old man struggling to make his way in the desert heat. As was his custom, Abraham quickly rose from his place and ran to greet this man. Upon reaching him, Abraham noticed that he was, indeed, weary with age - appearing to be about 100 years old. He relied heavily on his staff and, therefore, made his way slowly. With kindness, Abraham brought the man into his tent, had him sit, washed his feet, and then proceeded to serve him a meal. The old man, however, did not respond to Abraham as he expected. The old man failed to offer a blessing before he ate – as was custom in Abraham and Sarah's tent. He failed to express gratitude for what he ate – as was custom in Abraham and Sarah's tent. And he even told Abraham that he didn't believe in the God to whom Abraham prayed.

With each of the old man's responses, Abraham grew increasingly angry. Until, finally, Abraham became so utterly fed up with the man that he threw him out of the tent – leaving him in the desert to fend for himself.

Then, as so often happens in tales such as this, God enters the scene. Once the stranger had departed, God called out, saying: "Abraham, where is the old man?" Abraham proceeded to tell God all that had happened: how the man failed to bless the food, to give thanks for the food, and even how he denied that God is God. Listening to everything that Abraham said, God replied calmly: "Abraham, for the entire 100 years of this man's life, I have been patient with him. Are you telling me that you couldn't even be understanding with him for a single night?!"

Ashamed by what he had done, Abraham immediately asked God for forgiveness and ran out into the wilderness to find the stranger. Upon finding him, they returned to the tent, and Abraham then showed him the hospitality that he should have shown him earlier.

At the end of the story, we learn that it is because of Abraham's repentance - his apology for his rash behavior and his returning the man to the safety of the tent – that God promised in the future

to redeem the Children of Israel from Egypt and to bring them into the safety of the Promised Land.

As we begin the new year, what then, might our own *teshuvah* look like? How might we begin to turn the tide of negativity and motivate others and ourselves to lift people up rather than bring them down.

Jack Leslie, the Chairman of Weber-Shandwick, the international communications company that I mentioned earlier which studies civility in America, counsels that a change in our national behavior must start with education. It begins, he advocates, by having community and corporate leaders, schools, PTA's, and cultural influencers speak about the seriousness of the issue and urge action.

Bestselling author and family and internet safety advocate, Sue Scheff, in her book "Shame Nation," has called upon us to take, what she calls a "civility challenge." In her words: 'We need to take this situation head on. As Americans, we must collectively recognize that we have a civility problem – even a crisis, on our hands. Yet,' she continues, 'while we agree on what civility means, we don't see ourselves or even the people close to us as part of the problem. Each of us,' she concludes, 'needs to take a closer look at our actions on a daily basis and evaluate if our own behavior may be having a deleterious impact on others.'

In Hebrew, the word for patience is *Savlanut*. It comes from the Hebrew root letters "*Saval*" – meaning to "carry a load." To be patient...to approach another's mistake or a situation that is misaligned with our own expectations or needs...means calling upon the strength necessary to carry our disappointment and to respond with graciousness. Even under the best of times, this is not an easy lift. And, as we know, these are not the best of times. We are busy, rushed, full-to-overflowing with our own concerns and needs, and worn down in ways that we may not even recognize. And yet, it is especially now that the *mitzvot* of patience and understanding are so important. This is because we know that the people around us are equally strained – sometimes, more so - and that they are trying to make their own way. And it is because we know that our children and grandchildren are listening and learning from us.

A folktale from the Native American tradition: A young boy was given a unique and beautiful drum as a gift. When his best friend saw the drum, he asked if he could play with it. The boy felt torn. On the one hand, he didn't really want to share his new present. On the other hand, he cared about his friend. Frustrated by the request and the situation he had been put in, the boy angrily replied to his friend, telling him, "No!" His friend ran away and the boy was left alone - sitting by a stream - contemplating his dilemma. He hated the fact that he had hurt his friend's feelings, but the new drum was too precious to share. After a little while, he went to his grandfather for advice.

The Elder listened quietly and then said to his grandson: "In my own life, I often feel as though there are two wolves fighting inside me. One is mean, aggressive, and full of arrogance and

pride. But the other is peaceful, understanding, and generous. All the time they are struggling. You, my boy, have those same two wolves inside of you.”

“Grandfather,” said the boy, “which one will win?”
The Elder smiled....and said: “The one that you feed.”

On this Rosh Hashanah morning, as we embark upon a new year, may we recommit to deepening our own inner-capacity for graciousness.

May we, in our own moments of strain, call upon the strength necessary to respond to those around us with patience and understanding.

And may we, during our journey through life, strive to “handle with care” the souls of those we encounter along the way.

Cain y’hi ratzon.
Be this God’s will.

Amen.