

**Shanah tovah. May we all be blessed with a year of joy, health, and prosperity. There was once a man who was tired of eating the same thing for Shabbos dinner every night. Ninety-five percent of the time, his wife served the same old chicken and potatoes. On the major holidays, his wife would serve beef, and once in a blue moon she'd serve salmon.**

**So he says to his wife one day, "Honey, I'm tired of the same old, same old. Why don't you try cooking some other kind of animal? We could have duck or lamb or goat or whatever, just something new."**

**She gets mad and says, "You want to eat something different, fine, then you bring it home and I'll cook it." The man agrees and goes online to find a specialty kosher butcher. He finds a website called [kosherdeer.com](http://kosherdeer.com). On this website, he learns that he can buy farm raised, kosher deer meat, also known as venison.**

**He's intrigued by the idea, so he buys ten pounds of the kosher venison for one hundred dollars and asks his wife to cook it. When she serves the deer meat that Shabbos, the couple's two sons have no idea what it is. The boy points to the deer meat and asks, "Daddy, what is that?"**

**The man points to the barbecued deer meat and says, "Well, son, I'll give you a clue. This meat is something that mommy calls me sometimes." The boy's brother yells, "Wait, don't eat it! That's a good for nothing, lazy drunk!"**

**A joke about an unkind comment leads me to my topic for this morning, which is kindness. I thought long and hard about choosing kindness as my focus for this sermon because it almost seemed too trite or easy, like something for Barney or Sesame Street. I love you, you love me. . .**

**But it turns out that kindness is a far more pressing issue than you might imagine. Being kind is the foundation of our religion, nothing in the end is more**

important. Even such basic concepts as God, Shabbat, the holidays, Israel, and the study of Torah are meaningless without the foundation of kindness. I'm surprised that I have not addressed this issue over the past decade of High Holiday sermons, so now I am going to correct that error.

First, I am going to describe the state of kindness in America. Then I'm going to show you how important kindness is in the Jewish tradition. Then, I'll describe the tight connection between Rosh Hashanah and kindness. Finally, I'll give you some pointers on how to be a kinder person.

The state of kindness in America is not good. We are becoming nastier, meaner, and just generally less kind. Something has gone very wrong in our country. Why are we filled with such hate and rage? Here are just a few possible reasons.

One is the massive increase in the use of the internet, especially the use of anonymous comments. It used to be that if you were going to insult someone, you had to be brave enough to insult that person face-to-face, or at least on the phone.

Today, a commenter can hide in a shroud of anonymity and bash you publicly with near total impunity. The insults can go on for paragraphs, leaving you no opportunity to interrupt or debate.

Technology has also damaged our ability to be kind because it has reduced our patience and our attention span, and those are two basic components of kindness. If an expected result doesn't happen immediately, we start to get angry. And with a lot of communication being squeezed into micro-blasts of 140 characters, we're losing the ability to just sit, listen, and wait.

Just before Rosh Hashanah, it was announced that a new emoji would be available on the new iPhones. In case you don't know, emojis are little pictures

used in text messages. For instance, instead of typing I love you, you can send a picture of a heart.

So the new iPhone emoji is a little picture of a hand with its middle finger extended. The flip-the-bird emoji has been available on Android for a long time, so iPhone is just catching up to that feature. That emoji explains in one character what has happened to kindness in America.

Another possible reason for the dramatic decrease in kindness is the state of the economy, which never totally recovered from 2008 and currently seems to be facing another downhill slide. Kindness is a by-product of security. When we are afraid and not feeling secure about the future, we are more likely to be mean.

The person who works full time all year round, makes a decent salary and gets decent health care is becoming more and more rare. People are justifiably scared, and frightened people can turn nasty very easily.

Yet another reason for the lack of kindness these days is the rampant narcissism in America. The incessant search for fame and self-worship is just everywhere, especially in the younger generation. YouTube is filled with people who are just desperate to be noticed.

Narcissism used to be considered a mental disorder. Today, it's more of a job qualification. I'm not talking about people who get famous by being excellent at what they do. The problem is not that people want to be like Josh Groban, a talented singer. The problem is that people want to be like reality TV stars who are famous for being famous.

Narcissism causes kindness to decrease because it is impossible to focus on the search for fame and be kind at the same time. It's like sneezing with your eyes

**open or tickling yourself, it's just not possible. And I guarantee you that some people are trying to tickle themselves right now.**

**Add to these factors a snowballing heroin problem and lots of guns in the hands of people who should not have them and you have the recipe for disaster. Is it any wonder that the suicide rate in America is skyrocketing? It is any wonder that road rage is becoming commonplace?**

**Our world is changing in some frightening ways. It is becoming far less forgiving, far less nurturing, and as a result many of us have become testy, anxious, and less likely to be kind. For people who are already susceptible to severe depression, this is literally a matter of life and death.**

**So that's the state of kindness in America. In a word, it's terrible. But wait, Rosh Hashanah is about good news and there is lots of good news. The good news is that we Jews have a tradition that not only encourages us to be kind but commands and demands us to be kind no matter what is going on in our society.**

**There is no issue in Judaism that is more important than being kind, than being a mensch. The Torah tells us to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. V'ahavta l'reyekha kamokha. The rabbinic tradition took it one step further when Hillel said, "Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man."**

**That is an important addition, because without it, we would be free to impose our version of happiness on other people. People who love their own religion could and do force others to adopt it.**

**With Hillel's comment, we must refrain from doing anything to others that we would hate if it were done to us. Together, these ideas form the foundation of our faith. That is why Hillel himself once said to a man who wanted to convert to**

**Judaism, “Love your neighbor as yourself. All the rest is commentary, now go and study.”**

**God in our tradition is the power source of kindness. God starts the Torah with an act of kindness by giving the naked Adam and Eve leather cloaks to wear. The Holy One ends the Torah by providing a burial for Moses.**

**The Torah, therefore, is a sandwich of kindness, and we are obligated to take its message of kindness very seriously. Although kindness sounds like a topic for Mr. Rogers neighborhood or Sesame Street or a kindergarten class, it is in reality the very heart of Judaism, more important than tefillin, more important than kashrut, more important than Shabbat.**

**I don't care if a Jew is Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox. The only Jew I care about is the kind Jew. The Jewish philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that when he was young, he was impressed by clever people. When he became old, he realized that he was only impressed by kind people.**

**Likewise, the only movement in Judaism that matters is the kind movement. We Jews should have a reputation for being kind. It should be the first thing that non-Jews think when they hear the word Jew.**

**When I meet Jews, especially observant Jews, who are jerks, the hypocrisy causes my skin to crawl. I have a word for a Jew who is a jerk, and that word is jewk. Appropriately, that happens to be Israeli slang for a bug or insect.**

**Now for the connection between Rosh Hashanah and kindness. Rosh Hashanah is a perfect time to think about being a kind Jew. Take a look at the Torah reading for the second day, the test of the Akedah. God tests Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering, and Abraham would have slaughtered his own son had it not been for the angel who stayed his hand at the last second.**

**The Torah itself does not say what God was trying to test. Traditionally speaking, we say that the test was a test of Abraham's faith and obedience, and that he passed the test with flying colors.**

**But there is another way of looking at it. Perhaps the Akedah was a test of Abraham's kindness. If so, then Abraham did not pass the test. He failed it, and he failed it in a rather spectacular fashion. Everything was going so well, and then Abraham pulls this nonsense.**

**Killing your son because God told you to is not at all kind. What's worse is the fact that Abraham knew on some level that what he was doing was wrong. That's why he said nothing to Sarah or Isaac about God's plan. If he really felt that what he was doing was right, then he would have told the people closest to him.**

**But he didn't, and that shows he doubted the rightness of his actions. He should have called God's bluff and said, "No, I'm not going to slaughter my own son. Go find someone else to bully!"**

**Isaac, in contrast, is a case study in kindness. He figures out what's going on, and according to the midrash, he said to his father, "Don't tell my mother what you did to me while she's standing on the roof, or she might jump and kill herself." That's Isaac for you. Here he is about to be murdered and he's worried about how his mother will take the news.**

**There is evidence in the tradition that Abraham turned into an arrogant jerk just before the Akedah. The Torah itself says that Abraham told his two servant boys to stay behind with the donkey. The midrash in Bereishit Rabbah, chapter 56 says that Abraham said to his servants, "You two stay should stay with the donkey because you're both similar to donkeys."**

**This is not an unfamiliar phenomenon to me. Arrogant behavior and religious fervor often go hand in hand. Intensely religious people run the risk of confusing God's power with arrogance. People who are utterly convinced that they and they alone are doing God's will frequently come to the conclusion that rules are for little people, not them.**

**In the case of Abraham, his communion with God caused his morality to short circuit. Basic kindness no longer mattered to him. He was willing to insult his servant boys and he was determined to kill the son that Sarah wanted so badly. The feelings of other people no longer mattered because Abraham thought he had God on his side.**

**The shofar itself reminds me of kindness because it forces us to listen. The shofar blowing is the only time when a Jew is absolutely commanded to be utterly silent and focused. We Jews love to flap our gums and talk, but this is the one time when silence is mandatory.**

**If we could take that kind of radical listening and use it during the other days of the year, we would become kinder people. We would listen and let people finish a sentence before giving our two cents. We would think about what is said to us rather than just react to it.**

**The shofar also calls kindness to mind because of the sounds it makes. Think about the sounds that we hear from it. The tekiah is the sound of royal majesty. The t'ruah is the uluating sound of middle eastern joy. The shevarim is the sound of sobbing brokenness.**

**All of these shofar sounds teach us about kindness. We should treat each other like kings and queens deserving of a royal trumpet salute. We should celebrate each other's joys as if they were our own, and we should share each other's pain as if it were our own suffering.**

**Rosh Hashanah is also an ideal time to think about kindness because kindness is the next logical step after repentance. Once we have a clean slate, it only makes sense to be kind and not mess it up. Otherwise, we're like the alcoholic who gets sober and then celebrates his sobriety at a bar.**

**Now I don't want you to think that being kind is easy. It's not easy at all. Let's face it, lots of people are really irritating. But we have an obligation to be kind to them, as well. Being kind to nice people is not impressive. The challenge is being kind to people who don't deserve our kindness.**

**A story in the Talmud illustrates this issues. There was once a rabbi named Rabbi Yose of Galilee who was married to a very mean and nasty woman who yelled at him in public. She made his life miserable day in and day out.**

**His friends said to him, "Why don't you just divorce her?" He said, "I can't afford the divorce settlement in the ketubah." This went on for several years when finally, one of the man's friends said, "I can't take your complaining anymore. Just divorce her and I'll pay her settlement."**

**The now divorced mean woman married a schlemiel, a loser beneath her station in life. He became blind, and in order to survive, the mean woman had to lead her new husband by the hand around town begging for charity.**

**One day, the schlemiel said to his new wife, "Take me to Rabbi Yose of Galilee. I hear he gives generously to charity." The mean woman said, "I'm sorry, I'm too ashamed to do that because Rabbi Yose is my ex-husband." The loser went nuts with anger and started screaming at his wife in public.**

**When word of this got to Rabbi Yose, he gave his ex-wife and her new husband a house he owned and paid all of their bills for the rest of their lives. The moral of**



**the story is that one should be kind even to those who have hurt our feelings. That is the test of a truly kind person.**

**And what if that is impossible for you? What if the person in question has hurt you to the extent that you simply cannot be kind? My advice to you, depending on the circumstances, would be to remain silent. As we all learned in childhood, if you have nothing kind to say, don't say anything at all.**

**So how can we be more kind? Unfortunately, we don't have a settings panel like on our smartphones, one that would allow us to increase our kindness level automatically. In the absence of an easy method, allow me to suggest some strategies that could help us all be more kind:**

- 1. Be proactive rather than reactive. Don't wait for a reason to be kind. Being kind does not need a reason or a cause. It should simply be one's natural state of being. Don't wait to be asked for charity. Just give it.**
- 2. Give people the benefit of the doubt, what the Mishnah calls "Dan l'kaf zekhut." Unless you happen to be a judge, you should not be in the business of judging others.**
- 3. Smile more and groan less. Remember that both kindness and nastiness are very contagious. Whatever you broadcast will be spread around ten fold.**
- 4. Think twice before you speak and think ten times before you text, post, or email. Ask yourself, "Is there really any good reason to say this?" Often, the answer will be no. As the old saying goes, talking is worth one shekel, silence is worth two.**
- 5. If you're not already a regular here at Temple Beth El, come spend more time here. I've spent a lot of time in the North American Jewish community, and I can**

**tell you that people here are very kind. Believe it or not, not every synagogue is filled with kind people. Ours is.**

**May we all be blessed with a happy and healthy new year dedicated to kindness. Spread the kindness around, and you'll be amazed at how much better your life gets.**