

THE ART OF CIVILITY

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I was having coffee with a friend -- she happens to be a Methodist Minister -- and she shared a simple story with me that I have come to see as quite profound. She was going on an errand one day -- to pick up some laundry detergent at the grocery store. She just had to run in and run out. She parked her car and started walking to the entrance. There was someone walking in front of her and my friend, who just wanted to run in and run out, tried to dart around the woman ahead of her who was walking very, very slowly. She couldn't gracefully squiggle around her, so she was stuck behind this slow-paced woman. My friend must have been closing in on her and her impatient energy must have been palpable, for all of a sudden, the woman turned around and said, simply: *"I'm going as fast as I can."*

My friend is one of the kindest, most civil, most compassionate people I know. But in her mindless effort to run in and run out of the grocery store one day, she forgot that other people also live on this planet. "I'm going as fast as I can," came the words from the elderly woman in front of her, stopping my friend in her tracks, reminding her that we always have an opportunity to show a little humanity, to be just a bit more understanding, to practice being patient and at the very least, not to be quite so rude, even unintentionally.

A little civility is all it takes. But it is rapidly becoming a lost art. Who among us is not utterly dismayed by the lack of civility we witness at every turn, from the leaders of our society and our supposed role models, to our sports heroes, to the unnamed individuals we encounter on the sidewalks of our lives. We have created a culture that has come to view etiquette and manners as old-fashioned. Rugged individualism is the calling card of American society. And the message has its side-effects. Who is the individual? That is me. Me, me, me. I am entitled. I want to go first. I am actually a nice guy. I don't really mean it when I yell at you; I have had a hard day. I am stressed. I am actually a good person; I have just got my mind on other things. Other things. What other things could possibly be more important than each other? The people with whom we share an office, a classroom, a highway, a house, a synagogue, a marriage.

We see the breakdown of civility in simple things. The people who use their cellphones right below the "no cell phones" sign in the waiting room or the theater or even, *chas v'chalilah*, (God forbid), in the sanctuary. The person who drops some litter on the sidewalk and doesn't bother to pick it up. The driver who zips past a long line of waiting cars only to dart in and cut in front of everyone else at the last minute.

It is a short leap from disrespectful driving practices to the road rage that follows. "Road rage." That is a term that didn't exist a generation ago. It is a term that has become quaint today compared to the far more lethal acts of violence that have arisen from what start out as minor altercations and rise to horrendous consequences that are reported to us on our screens every day.

We have lost the art of civil discourse. The kind of language that has been used in this presidential campaign is language that wouldn't pass muster in a kindergarten class. The constant noise of one television panelist interrupting another reduces what should be a conversation into a shouting match. No one is listening anymore. Who has time to listen? It's like the Jewish joke that is very funny, but not so funny at all. "What's the opposite of talking?" "Waiting." These days, no one even has time to wait to talk. Just jump right in. Talk over. Talk louder. And louder. And we see it again and again and again. Most frightening of all, it is clear that the deterioration of civil discourse flows too clearly into a river of hate and into a sea of actual violence.

"Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me," is the childhood adage that draws a clear line between words and deeds. After all, we in America are free to speak our minds, express our convictions and state our beliefs without infringement. It is our First Amendment right to free speech. "Really?" "Not so fast!" says Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. Oliver Wendell Holmes was the Justice famous for his advocacy of broad protection of free speech. But he was also protective of its limits. Justice Holmes is the one who famously coined the phrase "clear and present danger."

The year was 1919. The case was called *Schenk versus the United States*. Holmes, writing for the majority, wrote: "The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic..." Holmes teaches that we have to look at the use of speech through a specific lens. "...the question in every case" he writes, "is whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about the substantive evils that Congress has a right to prevent."

Today is Rosh Hashanah. One of the holiest days of our year. A time out of time when we seize the opportunity to see our lives as though from afar, with keen perspective. We take a look at our world today and realize that we are drifting further and further from the realm of common decency that once held the very fabric of our society together. That common decency has a name. In Hebrew we call it '*derekh eretz*,' in Yiddish we call it '*menschlikeit*.' In English, we say '*civility*'.

Simply put, civility is the respectful, considerate and compassionate behavior that enables us to live and work together – locally and globally – embracing our shared humanity and interpersonal connections. Lest you think that civility is merely a Miss Manners instruction guide to behaviors that are outdated, be

reminded that civility is no less than the key to a thriving universe. How we treat each other. The rituals we adhere to for treating each other. The reminder we need every day that we are not alone on this planet and we have no time to lose in embracing the fact that our very humanity is bound up to that of others.

Over the summer we all had a chance to do some summer reading. One book I had the great pleasure to read was E.H. Gombrich's "A Little History of the World." Ambitious in his goal to write the history of the whole world in less than 300 pages, Gombrich was able to do so by writing history as though speaking it all out loud to his young granddaughter.

Gombrich writes about the Age of Chivalry and dutifully describes the beginnings of the concept of chivalry – largely in France during the time of knights riding horses. He explains that these knights were trained not just to defend their country, but also to act graciously, especially with loved ones. Today we claim with relief that 'chivalry is dead' because, thankfully, women aren't helpless creatures who need men to be valiant on behalf of the weaker sex, but wouldn't it be nice if we could all rise to the occasion to open doors for others and offer our seats to others and pick up items from the floor that others drop.

In Minnesota, we used to tease about the phrase "Minnesota Nice." How do you know you are in Minnesota? It's when you are at a corner with 4-way stop signs and traffic comes to a standstill because each driver is saying: "After You." "No, after you." "After you." We could stand to use a bit more "After You" in our world. Maybe even you can try adding just one more of those a day in the New Year ahead.

When you look up the word 'civility' in a Hebrew/English dictionary, the Hebrew word is '*adivut*.' *Adivut* is a fine word and a good translation. But when you look up *adivut*, the translation into English is not 'civility.' Rather, it says: 'kindness.' Now that's a wonderful lesson. The Hebrew teaches us that civility is really, at its core, about kindness. And kindness is the most important character trait in the world. Of course in high school, you would think that the most important trait was to be good-looking. In college, to be smart. In adulthood, to be successful. But in Judaism, it is to be kind. In high school, in college, in adulthood, in life: the most important thing is to be kind.

Every single one of us, I am convinced, is kind. That's the good news. And every single one of us misses opportunities for kindness every day. That's the challenge. Kindness. Civility. Graciousness. Humility. Manners.

When Jewish immigration to this country was at its peak in the early 1900's, the most popular Jewish book of the day was not the Bible or the Talmud, or even the prayerbook. It was a book called, in Yiddish, the Bintel Brief. A Jewish "Miss Manners," Bintel Brief is Yiddish for "Bundle of Letters" and it was an advice column that appeared in the Daily Forward. The things for which we seek advice say a lot about who we are. The Bintel Brief is filled with letters that reveal a yearning for

civility, a striving to do the right thing. In one letter, a New York factory owner worries that he is not paying his workers enough to make ends meet. He has a business to run and there is a limit to the wages he can afford, but the suffering of his employees is tearing at his heart. What should he do? Another letter is about an 18-year old boy who is a machinist, and gets beaten up as if he was a punching bag. Is there a right way to respond so he can retain his dignity and his manners?

It seems so obvious now that I know it, but I never realized before that the word “manners” is from French. Of course! ‘Manners’ comes from the word “main” meaning “hand” in French. Manners have to do with what you do with your hands. Where you put your elbows if not on the table, where you place your coat if someone else is cold, how you extend your hand when someone else is in need.

Our son Charlie, and his delightful new wife Heather, are here with us this Rosh Hashanah. Nancy and I are thrilled to have them here from Aspen, Colorado where they live, to celebrate the New Year with us. Maybe it is because I have had their visit on my mind, I want to share a lesson I learned about manners from Charlie, a lesson he learned at summer camp.

It has to do with salt and pepper. I don’t know about you, but when I was growing up, if I ever needed the salt, I would say: “Please pass the salt.” If I needed the pepper, I would say: “Please pass the pepper.” In our house growing up, Charlie called these two items ‘the buddies’ and he would always pass them together. Now, I know many of you are far more highly evolved than I am, so you already knew. As a matter of traditional rules of etiquette, you are supposed to pass the salt & pepper together, even if only one of them is requested. They are indeed, thank you Camp Thunderbird, buddies.

Now for the 200 level course in etiquette: where manners meet ethics. The question is: *Why* do we pass the salt and pepper together? Think about that. One answer: if someone needs one, they might also need the other. That’s a good answer. And evidence that you are really thinking of that other person by anticipating their needs. Another possibility: passing the salt & pepper together makes them easier to find. So now you are not only thinking about the person who made the request, but about some theoretical person in the future. And I will throw in one more reason to keep the salt & pepper together: by passing them together, you help assure that someone doesn’t accidentally mistake the salt for pepper or the pepper for salt, alleviating a potential problem for the other. How kind, how civil, how mannered, how gracious of you, every time you pass the salt & pepper. Who knew that simple manners could lead to a treatise in moral philosophy? Our world doesn’t need more salt & pepper, but it definitely needs more buddies.

Civility is not only based on how we reach out with our hands and extend ourselves, it also requires our knowing when to hold back, when NOT to do

something, when to use that lost art we call self-restraint. In Judaism, we have 613 commandments. 248 of those commandments start with the word 'DO.' They are positive commandments and require action. 365 of those commandments are negative commandments and require us NOT to do something. Like NOT to murder and NOT to commit adultery and NOT to gossip. Our sages knew that the commandments not to do something were infinitely harder than the commandments TO do something. That is why, when asked what constitutes heroism? Who among us is a hero? The rabbis answered succinctly: Who is a hero? The one with self-control. *Azeh hu gibur? HoKovesh et Yitzaro.* The one who can control their impulses. Look at our political leaders today. Who are the heroes?

The breakdown of civility in our society can be seen at every turn. The reasons for that breakdown? Theories abound. One problem is social media and how we have come to listen only to people just like us. Another is the pressure on television networks to attract ratings and therefore to sensationalize everything. Our American culture of informality, calling everyone by first names, allows our sense of respect to slip. The drive to achieve, the sense of not having enough time to get everything done, the increasing alienation between neighbors who don't know each other any more, our lack of patience in an age of immediate answers from Siri and Google – all of these and more contribute to the erosion of a civil society.

Today is the first day of the year five thousand, seven hundred and seventy-seven. We are opening into a New Year where we can be the answer to the problem, indeed we must be the answer to the problem. We can turn the channel on incivility and call it out for what it is. We can pay better attention to our own behavior and cultivate our own awareness of others, our patience with friends, our kindness to strangers. *'I am going as fast as I can,'* the old woman said to the minister.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us stop walking around as though we inhabit only our own worlds. The truth is there is only one world; each of us is a part of it and a part of each other.

On this most holy of holy days, hear the words of Albert Einstein, who said that those of us who think we are separate from the rest are experiencing "a kind of optical delusion of consciousness."

This Rosh Hashanah may we regain our consciousness, not only of others, but of ourselves. With every step, more gratitude, more awareness, more graciousness, more conscientiousness, more kindness, more civility.

Ken yih ratzon.
May it be God's will.
AMEN