

Kol Nidre

10/1/25

Cindy and I love to hike and walk. We climb mountains and traverse valleys in exotic locales or simply stroll around our Cougar Mountain neighborhood. It gives us precious moments to be together with the added benefit of doing something that is good for our health. Lately we've played a bit of a game. Actually, it's more of a social experiment with good intentions.

We've noticed that more and more people whom we pass on our walks barely look up at us let alone offer a greeting. We lament this seeming lack of basic civility, courtesy, and connection. It seems a reflection of the fraying of larger social and communal bonds. And so, we make a fairly explicit point of saying "Hello." Sometimes it's just a nod to those insulated in AirPods listening to the latest podcast to drop. But we find that most people are responsive once we take the initiative.

Now, our daughter Julia reminds us that this probably would not work in Manhattan. The repetitive frequency of salutations would no doubt evoke skeptical looks of distrust amidst the ebb and flow of the faceless crowd along 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. But in so many ways, Cindy and I feel like we are offering an interpersonal version of the Broken Window Theory—in which fixing small examples of decay and disorder can stem a more serious decline into crime and violence. We hope that our small reminders of the power of simple gestures and random acts of kindness can turn the tide on the disconnect that so many of us feel from a sense of community and from one another.

Much has been written over the years to diagnose what ails our body politic. Twenty-five years ago, the public policy researcher Robert Putnam coined the notion that we are *Bowling Alone*—that the demise of bowling leagues reflected growing alienation and a weakening of the social capital that has cohered societies throughout human history. A generation later, as we retreat further into our cell phone silos and algorithm-driven information bubbles, we seem to be approaching a point of no return. The further we retreat from one another, the harder it will be to return to one another.

Recent events and dynamics have deepened our disconnect. We are overwhelmed by the onslaught of attacks on our system of government and insults to our collective wellbeing. Sometimes it feels like we are living out the alt-rock band REM's staccato list of crises in their song *It's the End of the World as We Know It*.

Just a sampling of this avalanche of the anxiety-provoking: Masked agents pull the profiled off our streets and into foreign dungeons; our military is being deployed as police in a performative show of power; our health care system has been overtaken and undermined by cranks, conspiracy-theorists and sycophants; 80 year alliances have been trashed, as China and Russia recast global influence; capricious fits of pique that pass for policy twist the economy; storied

institutions and successful corporations succumb to shake downs; congress is as compliant as Gumby and the courts are in the partisan bag. And let's not forget a besieged Israel, rising antisemitism, the perennial plague of climate change and the threat of an unbounded AI that has a 10% chance of bringing about our extinction.

Phew....It's...overwhelming and exhausting...to say the least. And it's not surprising that many of us meet these moments with a coping cocktail of apathy, cynicism, and resignation. In the face of such a tsunami of tsurris, it makes sense that we turn inward, circling the psychic wagons, focusing on our own welfare and the wellbeing of those in our tight circles of kinship.

But there's another description of how we see the world, how we feel, and how we respond...or choose not to respond. It's a fault and foible deeply rooted in the human experience and examined in the depths of our tradition. That concept? *Indifference*. Less the absence of awareness of need than a concession to the futility of response. Less a lack of care for others than a retreat into concern for self. Less a laziness of character than a paucity of spirit.

So, what does it mean to be indifferent? Is it some blasé kind of neutrality, a choice not to choose? The renowned writer Elie Wiesel expanded our understanding of this ambiguous concept. He wrote: *"The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And, the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference. Because of indifference one dies before one actually dies."*

This is a very Jewish take on the famous axiom: "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing." Passive acceptance of an unjust status quo or allowing ideals and institutions to fall prey to unbounded greed and abused power is more than a lukewarm enabling—it is *our* culpability and *our* complicity. Or as the 20<sup>th</sup> century prophet and scholar of the prophets, Abraham Joshua Heschel, intoned: "...indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."

Wiesel, Heschel and the biblical prophets they revered based their convictions on many passages in the Torah—but most tellingly on verses we recently read in the Book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is essentially the Torah's Greatest Hits—a reminder of all the most important ideas that the Israelites must remember before entering the Promised Land. God and Moses know that it is human nature to become complacent when comfortable, and to forget the expectations of our Brit...our Covenant with God.

Much of Deuteronomy is a potpourri of civil, ethical, and ritual commands blended together into a sacred smoothie. In the portion *Ki Teitze*, we read of our responsibilities to return lost items to their owners and to assist others when they are in dire need, as when their ox or ass has fallen along the side of the road—an ancient version of seeing a stranded driver on the highway.

The key phrase that compels our obligations in these circumstances is: *Lo Tuchal L'hitalel*—*you must not remain indifferent*. But as is often the case, a deeper meaning emerges in the nuances of the Hebrew. *L'hitalel* means to literally “disappear oneself,” or as the commentator Rashi offers, to close our eyes literally and morally and pretend not to see.

The rabbis of our tradition offer a kind of analogy in situations such as this—seeing this basic concern for property as a metaphor for something greater. If we are responsible to others for relatively minor concerns like lost clothing or stumbling livestock, *how much more so* are we obligated when a person's life or well-being are at stake.

In essence, this reflects one of Judaism's greatest insights: A recognition that our lowest level of living is the law of the jungle—to care only for ourselves and those nearest to us in our tribe or in our mindset. But it is our conscience rooted in faith that compels us to rise above the default self-concern that we share with the animal world of which we are a part. We are commanded to strive to see needs beyond ourselves and to act on those needs in ways that distinguish us as human beings, as moral agents, and as the most elevated creation of God—whose sparks of divinity reside within us waiting to be realized in our values and our deeds.

This reaction to indifference is even more explicitly proclaimed in another key part of the Torah, the portion *Kedoshim* from the Book of Leviticus. Amongst the ways that we can become holy—that we can become more like God—is *to not stand idly by the blood of our neighbors*. In other words, it is patently unJewish to say that the suffering or endangerment of others is “*not our problem*.”

We aren't required to risk our lives for others, but neither are we free from doing all we can to help. It's a demand that has crossed over into the mainstream, as many schools teach the importance of being an *upstander* rather than a *bystander*. The Torah teaches that this obligation is part of our tradition's most significant lesson: *To love others as we love ourselves*.

There are two levels of our response to indifference. The first is obvious yet perhaps the most challenging: Extending care and concern broadly—to those far beyond us—whether on the other side of the world or amongst future generations. This long-range compassion truly requires a deep moral vision and imagination—as we invest care in others for no other reason save that they are human—that they are fellow travelers on this brief sojourn through life—that they are children of the same God and thus endowed with innate sanctity and imprinted with the same divine image.

The challenge to overcome disinterest due to distance is compounded when others are vastly different from us—when their values and viewpoints are unfamiliar or strange—or especially when they belong to a people with whom we are in conflict—when even some members of that people commit heinous acts that should not be attributed to the whole of their people.

For Jews in this moment, it requires a heroic if not almost superhuman act of faith not to generalize the hatred or violence of the few to the many. It requires us to move beyond mere empathy and to identify with another—with the basic human qualities and needs and dreams that we all share regardless of the troubles that have plagued us.

The other level of our response to indifference is the individual and interpersonal. Like Cindy and my social experiment, we must never underestimate the power of our attention—a precious commodity we are all too ready to surrender to algorithms, product placements and memes, but are often too miserly to offer to those even closest to us. How many times have we allowed a dopamine-besotted moment on the phone to blot out the subtle yet significant needs of a spouse, as we mindlessly answer a question we didn't really hear with a dismissive, "*Uh, ok, whatever?*" How many times has our obsession with a seemingly critical issue at work or all-consuming social struggle taken us away from the small but longing voice of our child, who simply wants to be seen—seen as a person—seen as a priority---seen as cause worthy of our fragmented consciousness?

The path toward this generosity of spirit is not easy nor straightforward. But we must not disappear ourselves from the task nor hide our eyes from the need to embrace this *teshuva*—this turning toward what's most important, who's most important, and thus, who we strive to be.

As you might imagine, this focus on indifference is a vital part of our Yom Kippur liturgy. Before we recite the *Ashamnu* prayer—that confessional, alphabetic listing of sins which we emphasize with a physical beating of fist on heart—we read these words: "*Eloheinu velohei avoteinu v'imoteinu, tavo l'fanecha t'filateinu, v'al titalam meet-chi-na-teinu...*Our God and God of all generations, may our prayers reach your presence. And when we turn to You, *do not be indifferent.*"

We hope and pray and even expect for God to hear us, to see us, to respond to us with care and compassion and love when we offer a heartfelt and genuine plea. But are those pleas so different from the hopes and prayers and expectations that others have for us?

Perhaps God is so beyond us that these expectations are unfair to place on mere mortals? Or maybe when we rise above our default to indifference—when we see beyond the paltry veil of our self-concern---when we reach beyond the petty trappings of our personal need—we not only attain the highest and holiest levels of our human potential—we become agents of the Most High—bringing the power of the sacred to meet the problems of our times—bringing divine love to heal a troubled world—bringing the touch of that Ultimate Other to sooth the pain of all others.

We recited these stirring words of *Ashamnu*—*we are guilty*--a few minutes ago, perhaps mindlessly or as a kind of religious reflex. I challenge you to see and feel them anew when you offer them tomorrow, investing them with a

sensitivity and purpose that is a sign of mutual morality—as much a hope to receive the help we need as it is a commitment to extending help to others—as much a longing for God’s response as a devotion to how we can respond to others—a quest for an answer that demands our answer to a question.

Our responsibilities in facing our indifference have an expiration date. They are time-bound and demand a quick turn-around of heart and mind. For the needs of the suffering, the desperate and the despairing are dire and imminent. And the bonds of love and care that we forge with those closest to us are fragile and vulnerable to our absence and our neglect.

The power of art to move hearts and minds—especially art that reflects the most personal parts of our lives—can transform us as palpably as we can transform the lives of others when inspired to do so. Here’s a song that resonated with my father, *alav ha-shalom*, when he struggled to balance the demands of a busy rabbi with the call of family and home. It has guided and chided and shaken me out of my complacency—my indifference—my disappearance from the people and the purpose and the principles that I cherish and that define who I am and who I long to be.

#### *Cat’s In The Cradle*

In this coming year of uncertainty and possibility—of trial and promise—of fear and of hope--may we see in the struggles of others our strength to provide—may we hear in the cries of the suffering our power to heal—and may our turning inward bring a probing of conscience and soul that compels the outreach of our hands, the overflowing of our hearts, and the outpouring of God’s love to repair the breaches of a waiting, wanting, and wondrous world. Amen.