

Rosh Hashanah Day One Sermon – Talking to Strangers

My wife recently pointed out a story to me on social media. The author is anonymous, but I know it is familiar to some of you, so if you've heard it before, please bear with me. As the author wrote: "I work in a decent sized, local, indie bookstore. It's a great job 99% of the time and a lot of our customers are pretty neat people. Any who, middle of the day this little old lady comes up. She's lovably kooky. She effuses how much she loves the store and how she wishes she could spend more time in it but her husband is waiting in the car (OH! I BETTER BUY HIM SOME CHOCOLATE!), she piles a bunch of art supplies on the counter and then stops and tells me how my bangs are beautiful and remind her of the ocean ("Woooooosh" she says, making a wave gesture with her hand)

Ok. I think to myself. Awesomely happy, weird little old ladies are my favorite kind of customer. They're thrilled about everything and they're comfortably bananas. I can have a good time with this one. So we chat and it's nice.

Then this kid, who's been up my counter a few times to gather his school textbooks, comes up in line behind her (we're connected to a major university in the city so we have a lot of harried students pass through). She turns around to him and, out of nowhere, demands that he put his textbooks on the counter. He's confused but she explains that she's going to buy his textbooks. He goes sheetrock white. He refuses and adamantly insists that she can't do that. It's like, \$400 worth of textbooks. She, this tiny old woman, bodily takes them out of (his) her hands, throws them on the counter and turns to me with a(n) intense stare and tells me to put them on her bill. The kid at this point is practically in tears. He's confused and shocked and grateful. Then she turns to him and says "you need chocolate." She starts grabbing handfuls of chocolates and putting them in her pile.

He keeps asking her “why are you doing this?” She responds “Do you like Harry Potter?” and throws a copy of the new Cursed Child on the pile too.

Finally she’s done and I ring her up for a crazy amount of money. She pays and asks me to please give the kid a few bags for his stuff. While I’m bagging up her merchandise the kid hugs her. We’re both telling her how amazing she is and what an awesome thing she’s done. She turns to both of us and says probably one of the most profound, unscripted things I’ve ever had someone say:

"It’s important to be kind. You can’t know all the times that you’ve hurt people in tiny, significant ways. It’s easy to be cruel without meaning to be. There’s nothing you can do about that. But you can choose to be kind. Be kind.”¹

As far as I can tell, it is a true story, though with the internet, one can never be one hundred percent sure. But it did get me to thinking about the issue of, not so much kindness, as much as it did about the very idea of talking to and interacting with strangers.

Now, I know, as children we were all most likely taught not to talk to strangers, but again, please bear with me.

There was an article posted on bbc.com this past June entitled: The surprising benefits of talking to strangers. It was authored by behavioral scientists Nicholas Epley & Juliana Schroeder.² It begins, “Most people spend part of every day surrounded by strangers, whether on their daily commute, sitting in a park or cafe, or visiting the supermarket.

Yet many of us remain in self-imposed isolation, believing that reaching out to a stranger would make you both feel uncomfortable.

¹ https://beepboop-its-a-robot.tumblr.com/post/148856159625/set-this-up-next-to-our-harry-potter-display-im?is_related_post=1

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-48459940>

These beliefs may be unwarranted. In fact, our research suggests we may often underestimate the positive impact of connecting with others for both our own and others' wellbeing.

For example, having a conversation with a stranger on your way to work may leave you both feeling happier than you would think.

We asked bus and train commuters in Chicago how they would feel about striking up a conversation on their morning commute, compared to sitting in solitude or doing whatever they normally do. Most thought that talking would lead to the least pleasant commute.

However, when we actually carried out the experiment, those randomly assigned to talk had the most pleasant commute.

Our commuters estimated that only about 40% of their fellow train passengers would be willing to talk to them. Yet every participant in our experiment who actually tried to talk to a stranger found the person sitting next to them was happy to chat.

Thinking others aren't interested in talking, or won't like you, are the very things that will keep you from making contact.

In fact, research suggests that we consistently underestimate how much a new person likes us following an initial conversation.

Separate experiments on buses and in taxis yielded similar results; individuals found connecting with strangers was surprisingly pleasant.

The positive impact even seems to spread to the person you talk to. In another experiment conducted in a waiting room, we found that not only did the people we encouraged to talk have a more pleasant experience, but so did the person they were asked to talk to.

Of course, nobody appreciates unwanted attention.

But simply reaching out to a fellow human being to say hello may be better received than people realise. Few start a conversation with a stranger, but most seem happy to talk if you reach out with good intentions.

One reason may be that the experience of talking with others and hearing a stranger's voice makes us realise they have a rich inner life of thoughts, feelings, emotions, and experiences, just like us.

These brief connections with strangers are not likely to turn a life of misery into one of bliss. However, they can change unpleasant moments - like the grind of a daily commute - into something more pleasant.

Humans are inherently social animals, who are made happier and healthier when connected to others. Feeling isolated and lonely, in contrast, is a stress factor that poses a health risk comparable to smoking and obesity.

Having positive social relationships has been put forward as a key ingredient for happiness, more significant even than how much we earn...”

The author’s go on to write, “Our findings do not suggest that you should talk to every person you see, or that you should engage with everyone who attempts to approach you.

Instead, the next time you'd like to help a stranger with something, or strike up a conversation, but are worried about how they might react, simply give it a try.

Our research suggests it's likely to go significantly better than you might expect, leaving both of you feeling happier and better connected.”³

Today we read from the Akeda, the binding of Isaac. One of the most challenging sections of the entire Torah. And every year, we are left with a lot of uncomfortable questions like: why did

³ Ibid.

God request Abraham sacrifice his son? Or why did Abraham go along with it? Or was Isaac a willing participant, and if so, why did he go along with it? But we're not going to attempt to answer those questions today.

Instead, the moment we are going to look at, was the moment where the whole story turned on a dime: "Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son, when the *malach*, the angel cried out, "Avraham, Avraham!" and Abraham responded, "*Hineini*, here I am." The angel replied, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."⁴

Here, we have an encounter between two characters who did not know each other, the *malach*, the angel or messenger, and Abraham. They both learned something surprising about each other. The angel witnessed Abraham's devotion to God. And Abraham learned, in the words of Milton Steinberg, "it was God's nature and merit that He would not accept an immoral tribute."⁵ True it was perhaps a planned meeting, but nonetheless, Abraham and the *malach* learned something new about each other and were hopefully the better for it.

This is not to say that every encounter with a stranger will go the way we hope it will. Malcolm Gladwell recently wrote a whole book entitled Talking to Strangers about becoming more aware of what we think we know versus what we actually know when encountering strangers. As he wrote, "We have no choice but to talk to strangers, especially in our modern borderless world. We aren't living in villages anymore ... (yet) we should also accept the limits of our ability to decipher strangers."⁶

⁴ Based on Genesis 22:10-12

⁵ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/akedah>

⁶ Gladwell, Malcom, Talking to Strangers, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2019, pgs. 342-343

So if there is a risk in talking to strangers, but a necessity, is there a place where we can minimize the risk and maximize the reward? Of course the answer is yes. There is perhaps one environment even more so than a bus stop or a book store, where there is real possibility for genuine and meaningful encounters, and that is in the synagogue. Already, just by entering the doors, we are walking in with certain assumptions and a certain set of shared values. These assumptions may be erroneous, as they are often based on experiences from previous congregational life. Many congregations are similar in structure, function, music and experience, but none of them are exactly the same.

But we are all here because of a shared religious tradition in Judaism, though what that tradition means to each of us, is of course, different. The synagogue is one of those rare places where folks from all walks of life have the opportunity to encounter each other.

And there is good reason to do so because aside from building community, as Epley and Schroeder argued, it is good for us. I'll give an example. I am a regular attendee of the CCAR (Central Conference of American Rabbis) convention almost every year. Yet, there have been years where my closest friends in the rabbinate have not been able to attend for a variety of reasons. I found during those years that I was quite lonely and did not particularly enjoy myself or find the convention meaningful. So I made a choice, rather than just to lean on a close group of friends, I chose to expand my circle of friends.

One way was purely accidental. I participated in the Religion Action Center's Brickner Fellowship for rabbis on social activism. I did this fellowship to learn more about how to be an effective social justice warrior and leader, but a wonderful side benefit was that I broadened my circle. And then I joined the convention planning committee, further enabling me to work with and get to know colleagues I would have never otherwise interacted with. Now when I see them

not only at CCAR but at gathers like AIPAC or L'taken or the RAC's consultation on Conscience, or Biennial (coming up this December in Chicago – let us know if you are interesting in joining our growing congregational contingent), I know I now have peers to connect with, and it makes those experiences all the more meaningful. So much so that I will now reach out to colleagues I don't know, by talking to strangers, and I think it makes both of our experiences more profound.

Last year we spoke about the issue of mental health and depression and the importance of reaching out. We need to remove the stigma and provide support to one another. One of the best ways to do this is simply to engage and share our stories. People who are connected tend to feel less depressed and isolated, and it is even more important in a world that has provided us with increasing technology that enables us to isolate ourselves. We can now do our banking, order clothes and food, and so much more without talking to a single human being. How much the more so it is incumbent upon us to create and sustain a community that is all about personal interaction and connection.

We can talk about all of the initiatives to help sustain our congregational community. There is of course the High Holy Day Appeal to help us do things like keep the lights on and the doors open. There is our Free Religious School Campaign that has helped create pathways for strangers to find a new home here, so much so that we have seen our school grow by over forty percent at our youngest grades. None of our grades are combined any more as we have had to hire more teachers because of this initiative. And there is the Life and Legacy campaign to enable you to think of RTR in your legacy planning to help secure our future.

But you have to have a reason for doing so. RTR is not only the place where we can experience Judaism and all of its wonderful traditions, but it is also the place and the space where we can

encounter people we may not know. So as you are planning out your giving for the year, please to think of RTR. Your thoughtfulness and generosity are always greatly appreciated.

In other news, we are also planning a congregational trip to Spain, and if you are interested in learning more, please let me know, I'd love to have you join us as we trace the history of Sephardic Judaism as well as encounter the beauties of historic and modern Spain.

But there is another reason to possibly join us on the trip as well. A couple of years ago I led a congregational trip to Israel. Not everyone on the trip knew each other. There was even a group of single women, who ended up becoming the closest of friends, and now they often travel the world together. They took the risk not only of talking to strangers but also of traveling with strangers and it has paid off in droves.

So on this Rosh Hashanah, if you are not inspired by any of the other messages throughout the Yamim Noraiim, these High Holy Days, please be inspired to reach out to someone here who you may not know or someone you may not know well. For as Maya Angelou said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." May we all help each other to feel better about ourselves, our journeys, our lives, our communities and our congregational family as we enter into this 5780.

But before we conclude, there is a coda to the story of the bookstore, as the purveyor went on to write: "The kid thanks (the woman) again and leaves. I tell her again how awesome she is. She's staring out the door after him and says to me: "My son is a homeless meth addict. I don't know what I did. I see that boy and I see the man my son could have been if someone had chosen to be kind to him at just the right time."

I've bagged up all her stuff and at this point am super awkward and feel like I should say something but I don't know what. Then she turns to me and says: I wish I could have bangs like that but my darn hair is just too curly." And leaves.

And that is the story of the best customer I've ever had. Be kind to somebody today."⁷

May we all be inspired to talk to strangers in appropriate ways, may we all choose a little more kindness, for you may never know the impact of what you say and what you do can have on those with whom you come into contact. So why not take a chance? The conversation you have today or tomorrow could change a life, and by changing a life, it can change the world.

L'shana Tova,

Rabbi Benjamin Sharff

⁷ https://beepboop-its-a-robot.tumblr.com/post/148856159625/set-this-up-next-to-our-harry-potter-display-im?is_related_post=1