

The Compassion Challenge
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Amid all the bad news this summer, there was one bright spot, The ALS Ice-Bucket Challenge. If you subscribe to Facebook, or watched or read any news during the months of July and August, you saw everyone doing it -- posting videos of themselves pouring buckets of ice-cold water over their heads, making great fun of themselves, challenging others to do the same as well as to donate money to the ALS Association. Despite the cynicism about people taking part because they are narcissistic, most of the participants had good intentions and many of the shorts were a lot of fun to watch, whether of celebrities, CEO's, athletes and politicians or of regular people like us.

And no matter how we feel about the campaign, we can't discount, that in a few weeks' time, \$100 million was raised to fund research and advocacy for ALS, often called Lou Gehrig's Disease because of its most famous victim. In addition to seeking a cure, the Association works to provide compassionate care and support for the afflicted and for the families who care for them. Just for comparison, that \$100 million was 3,400% more money than the \$2.8 million that was raised during the entire prior year.

Among the most moving videos of all was that of Anthony Carbajal. It begins humorously with Carbajal, a photographer, dressed up in a pink neon bikini top and soaping up a car before being doused with ice water. But, at around the two-minute mark, the clip takes a somber turn as he explains why he chose to take the challenge. With tears streaming down his face, swollen red eyes and anguish in his voice, he says: "I've been so terrified of ALS my entire life because it runs in my family. My grandmother had it. She was a second mother to me. My mother was diagnosed when I was in high school and five months ago, I was diagnosed at 26 years old. ALS is so, so f—king scary, you have no idea." He explains that he has already started losing movement in his fingers and, that, just like other ALS patients, eventually he will lose the ability to walk, talk, eat and breathe on his own. He concludes: "This is the first successful advocacy [ALS has] ever really... had and I'm so, so, so grateful. You have no idea how every single challenge makes me feel, lifts my spirits, lifts every single ALS patient's spirits. You're really, truly making a difference.

After dapping my own misty eyes, I wondered whether we deserved his heartfelt gratitude. I mean, what motivated all of us to give, whether with or without the ice-bucket? Was it just to be one of the masses generating laughs at our own expense or was it actually to help people in need? It turns out that others had thought about it too. In an article in *Entrepreneur Magazine*,ⁱ marketing executive Gabrielle Boko wrote that there were six viral-marketing lessons to be learned from the campaign's success -- six reasons people gave. The first was because of a worthy goal or cause, whose message was simple and direct; here it is: "there is a horrible disease out there called ALS and you can help find a cure." The

second reason people took part was that participation was fun and easy. The third, fourth, and fifth reasons for participating were immediacy, the power of multiplication and sharing the experience; in other words, you had 24 hours to complete the bucket dumping, or to contribute or to do both; you had to challenge three other people to do the same right then and there; and you got to share your video on every social media outlet allowing you and the ice-bucket challenge to multiply exponentially and go viral.

But it was the sixth reason given for the campaign's success that most interested me. Why did so many people participate? We took the challenge because, Boko writes, "it gave us a chance to feel good"; no matter the size of the donation, each of us felt like we were truly helping someone in need. Regardless of our wealth or status, our race or religion or nationality, our political beliefs or personal interests, we were, all of us, part of a greater good. Just as I had suspected all along, but in the language of the human spirit rather than the jargon of marketing: why was the Ice-Bucket Challenge so successful? Because we human beings want to give of our best selves. We desire to ease suffering. We yearn to be generous of our spirits and our wallets. No matter how much self-absorption or meanness or hardship or ugliness we see around us, more than anything we want to be kind and we want to experience kindness in return.

Not surprisingly, recent studiesⁱⁱ illustrate the positive effect that doing an act of kindness has on individuals -- simply put, kindness and generosity make you happy. In fact, researchers from Harvard Business School as well as from the Greater Good Science Center found that when people did kind acts for others, not only did they experience increased levels of happiness, but also their happiness led to increased acts of kindness; these findings suggest that there is a positive feedback loop between kindness and happiness, so that one encourages the other. Or as one of our own guides for living, *Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers*,ⁱⁱⁱ teaches, "*mitzvah goreret mitzvah*" "one good deed leads to another."

Judaism shares this notion with other religious traditions and ways of life as well. Buddhism follows a similar principal --the practice of compassion; the Tibetan word for compassion, *tongen*, literally means connecting with the suffering of others. When we are compassionate, recognizing the humanity and the needs of others, and acting upon them, it is proven that our minds, bodies and spirits respond; kind people have lower blood pressure and heart rates, boosted immune systems and optimal hormone levels. By connecting with the suffering of others and reaching out in kindness and with compassion, we become not only more empathic but also less lonely; not only less stressed, but also more satisfied, and, yes, we become happier. Try volunteering in our monthly soup kitchen; picking up the phone and calling a friend who is going through a hard time; bringing flowers home for your beloved; or even giving whatever amount you can afford to any person, institution or charity who could benefit from your help.

So if it is that easy to feel good, why don't we just do it -- why don't we just practice generosity of spirit all the time? The answer is, whether in the context of social science, psychology or religion, kindness and compassion don't come naturally to us human beings; they need to be cultivated. That is because authentic kindness is not simply the compulsion to do-good, it is a decision to respond to the

needs of others. To help others, you must first appreciate what it feels like to need the kindness of a loved one or stranger yourself, whether you are suffering today or have been down on your luck at some other point in your life. Your compassion must come, not just from a do-good impulse, but from empathy, [cont] from understanding that you, like everyone else, are one step away from needing the kindness of others, no matter how good your life is today. And, honestly, most of us just don't want to go there.

So why respond to the needs of others and do good? I mean, who, aside from your mother or your rabbi, insists that you must be kind and compassionate to people, especially those less fortunate than you? The Torah - that's who.^{iv} Whether in *Exodus* [12:49], *Leviticus* [24:22], or *Numbers* [9:14; 15:15-16], over and over the Torah states that there should be one standard of justice, for both Israelites and "strangers" - all are equal before the law. Biblical scholars identify these "strangers" as outsiders, foreign residents who have left their own countries and are living for a time amidst the Israelites. Other verses throughout the *Five Books* carry the law even further. "You shall not wrong a stranger," they say - or, as some translate it, "You shall not grieve a stranger, or oppress him, because you [yourselves] were strangers in the land of Egypt" [*Exodus* 22:20]. And in other verses: "Do not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt [23:9].

It is one of the most familiar laws in the Torah -- part of long, detailed sections dealing with compassionate treatment of widows, orphans, slaves, animals, and those forced to go into debt to purchase the necessities of life. The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra points out that the basic issue here is the Israelites' behavior towards those who are powerless. Of course, no one at all should be harmed or oppressed. But the law focuses on the vulnerable - those deprived of support from their own clan or community, who can easily be abused and are commonly mistreated.

These laws depend, it seems, on the Israelites' sense of empathy. "*Atem y'datem et nefesh ha-ger* - you know the heart, the feelings, the soul of the stranger, for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt." The Torah is teaching us that our people's experience of injustice and pain, and our own personal suffering and need for humanity from others, should translate into a commitment to be fair and kind to others. It should prompt us to include every one, to reach out to those who have lost loved ones, to embrace the poor and the lonely.

But we all know that this is easier said than done. I have spoken to you many times about the way we human beings don't notice the humanity of those around us -- those who serve us; those who are different from us; those whose needs are great, who are sick, mentally or physically, or who are lonely. I have both witnessed and experienced first hand meanness, pettiness and selfishness -- not only outright bullying, but also people who are quick to blame others cruelly and harshly without acknowledging their own responsibility in things; people who can't be bothered to include one more person, who is clearly alone, for a meal; even family members who won't take the time to visit their own loved ones in assisted living or nursing home facilities or are shut-in their own houses.

It's interesting. So often, you'll tell me an off-color joke or express a political or religious opinion and are quick to ask, "Did I offend you, Rabbi?" I always answer the same way, "Don't worry about it; nothing bothers me except when people are unkind to each other." You see, I can appreciate differences of opinions, enjoy all kinds of humor and pretty much like all people -- except those who are mean.

Years ago, I traveled to San Francisco to officiate the marriage of a dear college friend. For whatever reason, Marty couldn't join me and, with my work schedule and cross-country flight availability, I needed to go directly from the airport to the rehearsal dinner at some restaurant in the city. When it came time to find a seat, I approached not one, not two, not three, not four, but five different tables of people, asking each if I could join them, only to be told, one after another, that all the seats were taken and none were available. After nearly giving up, finally, I approached a group who were clearly friends of the bride or grooms parents and asked if there was room for one more? One kind woman said, "whether there is a seat or not, we'll add one for you." That was all it took, a willingness to make room for one more; I'll never forget it.

So why didn't all the others I approached do the same? Empathy, the ability to understand and experience the feelings of others, is not innate; it is a learned skill that must be practiced. Some people are better at it than others. Interesting research, cited by psychologist Daniel Goleman suggests that levels of empathy are related to power and class. Here's some of what Dr. Goleman wrote:

"Turning a blind eye. Giving someone the cold shoulder. Looking down on people. Seeing right through them. These metaphors for condescending or dismissive behavior are more than just descriptive. They suggest, to a surprisingly accurate extent, the social distance between those with greater power and those with less . . . A growing body of research shows that people with the most social power pay scant attention to those with little such power. This tuning out has been observed, for instance, with strangers in a mere five-minute get-acquainted session, where the more powerful person shows fewer signs of paying attention, like nodding or laughing. Higher-status people are also more likely to express disregard, through facial expressions, and are more likely to take over the conversation and interrupt or look past the other speaker . . ."v If a prerequisite to empathy is simply paying attention to the person in pain, we can see how easy it is not to notice.

Of course, our level of power in relationship to others fluctuates constantly. Sometimes when we're in the presence of another, they're the wealthier, more powerful party. Sometimes we have more power. When that happens, "we, too, tend to pay less attention to those a rung or two down." This gets especially fascinating when we think about wealth and power not just in financial terms. The Torah does just that – that's why it mandates concern for widows, orphans and strangers regardless of their economic status.

People, like so many of us, who have a good marriage, a strong network of loving family nearby or a wide circle of friends have more social power than those who lack such support. We don't have to eat alone, or sit alone, or vacation alone, unless we want to. We always have someone to talk to. We know that others care

about us, truly want to be with us, are interested in what we have to say. We don't worry about how we're going to spend the weekend, or the holidays. We exist inside a warm, comfortable, well-lit circle of privilege.

And the truth is that when you're inside that circle, it's very hard to see and pay attention to those who are outside the circle. Maybe because it's scary to contemplate being in their situation – on your own, out in the cold, indifferent world, without the loving companionship of your spouse, your children, your friends. And so, even though we don't mean to, we turn a blind eye.

This self-absorption, this tendency to cocoon in our own circle of comfort and well-being, is a normal feature of human behavior. So the Torah reminds us constantly – 36 times, as the Talmud^{vi} famously teaches – to love, befriend and care for the stranger, the one who is outside the circle. Fighting the norms of human nature, the Torah calls on us, again and again, to work on ourselves by deliberately cultivating empathy.

Here's how I understand the verse that tells us that we know the *nefesh*, the heart and soul and feelings, of the stranger. The truth is that we often have no clue what it feels like to be outside the circle of privilege. But we have to make it our business to know, to enter into the felt experience of another person, to look at the situation as if you yourself were the poor person or the widow or the orphan. We need to dare ourselves to picture ourselves without the strength, power and social support we enjoy and to imagine how it would really feel. What would it be like to be out of work, falling behind on my bills? What would it be like to lose my beloved, my best friend in the world? Suppose I had to live without the child who gives me joy? How would it feel to be a newcomer? To always walk into this room alone?

If you have trouble picturing what it might be like, get to know someone in a more vulnerable position and they'll tell you. They'll tell you that even if they have wonderful friends, it's still hard at night to come home to an empty house, to eat and watch television by yourself. They'll tell you that you can't wait at home for people to call you; you have to initiate your own plans for weekends and holidays, and that can get exhausting. They'll tell you that in some senior communities, married couples almost never invite a single woman to join them for dinner, and it hurts.

They'll tell you how hard it is to ask for a ride to Ohel Sholom when you can no longer drive yourself, and how hard it is to get turned down. They'll tell you that most people are pretty busy with their own lives and they rarely spare a thought for those who are on the periphery of those lives. They'll tell you how often people thoughtlessly chat about their expensive vacations and the doings of their spouse or their successful children without wondering how their comments sound to people who have neither vacations nor spouse nor successful children.

But empathy can take us only so far. That's why the Torah doesn't rely on the Israelites' capacity for empathy when laying the foundations for a decent and generous society. Instead it presents a multitude of specific, concrete laws about how those with more power should treat those who have less. But is that realistic? Can even the Torah really legislate morality? Can you go against the natural human

tendency to like some people and dislike others, to include some and exclude others?

I believe you can. And I believe we can, that we should and that we must for ourselves, for our families, for our Temple and community, and for our society and world. I believe that amidst the self-absorption, meanness, hardship and ugliness within and around us that we can see the best in ourselves and be the better person we imagine we can be. On these High Holidays, when we lay ourselves bare, admitting our failings, and, with contrition, opening ourselves to God's forgiveness, we can see ourselves as our benevolent God sees us. The God of kindness and compassion, the one called in the Torah *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, I will be that I will be, sees us not as we are now, but as the people who will be, as the person within us that will someday emerge. If we don't believe in our own capacity to change, we can accept that God's love can unlock our potential for kindness. For we all know that nothing is more powerful than the love of someone who believes in us more than we believe in ourselves.

For ourselves, for those we love, for our community, our society and world, we can, as members of a Torah-centered community, work to expand our own capacity for empathy. We can practice paying attention. And we can commit ourselves to following some basic rules. Rules like remembering widows and the bereaved, single folks and strangers, and including them in our plans. Inviting them for Shabbat and holiday celebrations. Avoiding behavior that might give pain to the vulnerable. Extending our circle of warmth and concern. Such compassionate practices eventually become habits and the cornerstone of communal life.

True empathy can be upsetting, jolting us out of our sense of comfort and good fortune. Truly inclusive behavior can be difficult, especially if you are shy, reserved, or simply prefer to spend time with people you already know and like. So why should we subject ourselves to these hard behaviors? The benefit is clear. We'll create a culture in which, when we ourselves are in a position of need – as will all of us some day – we will reap the rewards of a community rich in kindness and generosity.

In the immortal words of Anne Frank, "How lovely to think that no one need wait a moment. We can start now, start slowly, changing the world. How lovely that everyone, great and small, can make a contribution toward introducing justice straightaway. And you can always, always give something, even if it is only kindness!"

If Anne Frank could think about kindness in the midst of the darkness of her world, how can we not practice it each and every day in the abundance of blessings that is ours? So join me this New Year in taking the compassion challenge. Its simple stated goal is to repair the world one act of kindness at a time. Its need is immediate and your doing it will both challenge and inspire others to do the same. God-willing its message will go viral and we will, every one of us, know the fulfillment that comes from bringing a little bit more kindness and joy into our lives, our community and our world. Amen.

 ENDNOTES

ⁱ Gabrielle Boko, "6 Viral-Marketing Lessons to Learn from the Ice Bucket Challenge," *Entrepreneur.com*, August 27, 2014.

ⁱⁱ The following information is drawn from several studies linking kindness and happiness: Rachel Verlik, "Finding Your Authentic Happiness," *Huff Post Blog*, August 28, 2014; Bonnie Tsui, "Cashing in on Kindness," *Newsweek*, March 19, 2014; Lara B. Aknin, Elizabeth W. Dunn, Michael I. Norton, Happiness Runs in a Circular Motion: Evidence for a Positive Feedback Loop between Prosocial Spending and Happiness," *Journal of Happiness Studies*, April 2012, Volume 13, Issue 2, pp.347-355; Alex Dixon, "Kindness Makes You Happy . . . And Happiness Makes You Kind," *Greater Good Science Center*, September 6, 2011; Deborah Khoshaba, Psy.D. "Authentic Kindness Matters To Your Fulfillment," *Get Hardy*, March 21, 2012; and Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor, *On Kindness*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Mishnah, Pirkei Avot*, 4:2.

^{iv} The sections on our Textual tradition on empathy as well as the articles, Dr. Daniel Goleman, "Rich people just care less," *New York Times*, October 5, 2013 and Elaine Scarry, "The Difficulty of Imagining Other Persons," *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*; Weiner, Eugene (ed. and introd.), 1998, are from the sermon of Rabbi Janet Ross Marder, "Torah Ethics in a Kindergarten Class," *Temple Beth Am*, January 25, 2014.

^v Goleman, "Rich People Just Care Less," October 5, 2013.

^{vi} *Baba Metzia* 59b.