# Building a World of Kindness

# The great rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel once said: “When I was young, I used to admire intelligent people; as I grow older, I admire kind people.” Those words resonate so deeply with me—because when I was younger, my goal was to try to be the smartest guy in the room. Today, my deepest wish is that I have been kind.

# I am indeed getting older. I am speaking to you this morning as I start my 20th year as your rabbi. There are a lot more gray hairs on my head than when I first met many of you! But Heschel’s words resonate with me particularly in this New Year because it seems like kindness is in increasingly short supply.

# I imagine that this is your experience as well. Perhaps you have found drivers on the road who were quicker to lay their hand on the horn if the light has turned green for more than a few seconds. Maybe you have been surprised to see the way a fellow passenger has treated a flight attendant on your flight. Maybe you have seen the way that a frustrated patient has taken out their anger on a nurse.

By all reports, both anecdotal and statistical, Americans are becoming **meaner**. We used to be able to say that “Courtesy is contagious.” Today it seems truer to say that “Courtesy is in Short Supply.”

The rising tide of incivility in this country is the subject of an article published earlier this month by David Brooks in The Atlantic entitled How America Got Mean. Brooks offers several widely held hypotheses for what may be the cause of our increasing rudeness, lack of manners and incivility. Technology is the culprit because we inhabit increasingly narrower silos in our social media bubbles. Isolation is the cause; we have stopped participating in community organizations and tend to interact less with those outside our immediate spheres of concern. Socio-economics is the problem; income inequality leaves those who are just scraping by feeling more afraid, lonely alienated and pessimistic.

While all of these explanations may represent part of the story, Brooks’ hypothesis is that the deeper story is actually the simplest: “We inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration. Our society has become one in which people feel license to give their selfishness free rein. We live in a society that is terrible at moral formation.”

This morning I want to explore with you the corrosive effects of a world in which we are increasingly unkind to one another and offer you two Jewish prescriptions for how to combat it—one focusing on our collective response—and one focusing on our individual interactions. The first of the two core concepts is embedded in the Psalmist’s words *Olam Hesed Yibaneh—*the world must be built upon a foundation of loving kindness and decency. Embedded in this phrase is an entire philosophy of manifesting the collective good and maintaining the collective welfare. The second path of how we as individuals can clean up the incivility around us is encapsulated in the phrase *Derekh Eretz—*meaning literally, the path of the world—but meaning figuratively, how to do the right thing. *Derekh Eretz* exhorts us to treat the smallest moments of our lives with loving attention, focus and kindness. Each of these two concepts, *Olam Hesed,* with its focus on our collective responsibility, and *Derekh Eretz,* with its focus on the individual, is woven into the heart of this Rosh Hashanah day. And taken together, they offer us a path out of the meanness and selfishness that characterizes this time*.*

Let me start with the concept of our **collective responsibilities.** In fact, it is the ability to say unabashedly that we have obligations to one another that is the basis for creating a healthy collective eco-system. A culture that is invested in shaping the character of its members helps make people resilient by giving them ideals to cling to when times get hard. It reminds them that the purpose of their lives extends beyond the ability to earn a living and to provide material comforts. At times of upheaval and cultural shifts, the capacity to inculcate citizens who take collective responsibility seriously becomes the very basis for collective survival.

2,000 years ago, with a Temple in ruins and with no way to bring offerings to God, the great Sage Rabbi Yohanan taught that the basis for rebuilding a world in chaos is with *Hesed—*with acts of loving-kindness. It was an astonishing reordering of the priorities of Judaism—and made all the more profound because the Sages pointed to Jewish incivility as the cause for the destruction of the Temple—not Roman military might. We lost the Temple and our sovereignty over Jerusalem because of *Sinat hinam—*because of causeless hatred of Jews towards each other. The antidote in the aftermath of the Temple’s destruction was *Hesed—*was the caring and concern we might bestow upon one another.

Now a new paradigm would emerge. Rather than oﬀering sacriﬁces at the *Beit Mikdash*, in the Holy Temple, the priority would shift to how we would behave in private and in public toward one another. With this shift of priorities, reinforced by countless texts of the *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, *Midrash*, loving-kindness became the foundation of the Jewish moral universe. As Hillel said when asked to teach Torah on one foot: “Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you. The rest is commentary, *Tzay ulmad*—go and learn”. *(Shabbat 31a)* In other words, the purpose of both the study of Torah and the observance of *mitzvot* is to learn *Hesed*.

For our Sages, “*Torah t’khalta gemilut hasadim v’sofo b’gemilut hasadim*—The Torah begins and ends with *Hesed*.”*(Sotah 14a)* It begins with the *Hesed* of God clothing Adam and Eve and it concludes with the *Hesed* of God burying Moses—the *mitzvah* that we call *Hesed* *shel Emet*—the truest act of kindness—for we do it for another without any expectation or possibility of reward or return. No wonder at the heart of the 13 attributes that we say about God as ask for forgiveness during these Days of Awe is *Notzer* *Hesed*—You, God, abound in loving-kindness.

At a time of upheaval and disorientation, our Sages taught that a moral society could only be sustained by members who had internalized a deep commitment to engaging in acts of *H*esed, who were committed to treating each other with kindness, decency and respect. That was as true for our ancestors as it is for each one of us today.

Yet over the course of the past couple of generations, we Americans seemingly have lost our capacity to pass on this collective imperative. Our increasing willingness to be rude to one another is only the tip of the iceberg. We don’t teach people how to be virtuous and we don’t talk much about virtue or character anymore. According to a recent research paper, the appearance in books published in this country containing words associated with moral virtues dropped precipitously. Among them were the use of words like *bravery* (which dropped by 65 percent), *gratitude*(58 percent), and *humility*(55 percent). For decades, researchers have asked incoming college students about their goals in life. In 1967, about 85 percent said they were strongly motivated to develop “a meaningful philosophy of life;” [by 2000, only 42 percent said that](https://www.heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/pubs/TFS/Norms/Monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2000.pdf).

And without a collective commitment to responsibilities bound in our awareness of our mutual concern for each other, the social fabric begins to decay. The Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt distils this truth in his book [*The Righteous Mind*](https://tertulia.com/book/the-righteous-mind-why-good-people-are-divided-by-politics-and-religion-jonathan-haidt/9780307455772?affiliate_id=atl-347). He writes: “Moral communities are fragile things, hard to build and easy to destroy.” When you are raised in a culture **without** ethical structure, you become internally fragile. You have no moral compass to give you direction, no permanent ideals to which you can swear ultimate allegiance. “He who has a *why*to live for can bear with almost any *how*,” the psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl wrote. Those without a *why* fall apart when the storms hit.

But how do we bring these lofty concerns into the real world? How might we bring these commitments into the everyday circumstances of our lives? This is where we can start with a commitment to practicing actions filled with *Derekh Eretz.*

*Derekh Eretz* isthe way that we come to internalize how to do the right thing in the most mundane of circumstances. *Derekh Eretz* starts from the proposition that we share space with others, and that **our** needs do **not** take precedence over the needs of our fellows. Yes, that means not having loud phone calls in public places. It means refraining from leaning on the horn when the car ahead of us is slow to move when the light turns green. It means not talking during a movie—and maybe even not sleeping during the rabbi’s sermon! *Derekh Eretz* calls on us to be considerate.

Practicing *Derekh Eretz* can start with the simplest of gestures—here’s an example: You may not know that Wawa has deliberately designed their stores to offer each one of us who enter the chance to do a small act of *Derekh Eretz* when we go in. Corporate leaders at Wawa decided **not** to use sliding doors that open with an electric eye as most supermarkets do. Why? Because they found that by using doors that open manually, the vast majority of their customers hold the door open for someone who may be coming in as they go out—or vice versa. And here’s what else they noticed: People who enter their stores who have been the recipient of a small act of *Derekh Eretz* feel happier—and are likely to spend a bit more—because they feel better having received a small act of kindness. Talk about a Win-win!

Here is another simple way to practice *Derekh Eretz.* Try listening to what another person has to say. Truly listening. Giving someone our total attention, not breaking in on their words, letting them finish their sentence is a profound form of *Derekh Eretz*. It’s one of the greatest gifts that we can give another human being, the sense that they are being fully heard. After the service is over today, when we gather together for *Tashlich,* try putting this into practice. Go out of your way to find a Beth Sholom member that you haven’t seen in a while. Ask them how they are doing—or what’s new. And then try this. See if you can make eye contact and keep your lips pressed together while they are talking. Try asking a follow-up question after they finish. See if you can resist talking about yourself unless—and until—you are asked. The capacity to listen to another is a true gift that we can bestow so easily. It is another small way of enacting kindness and consideration.

*Derekh Eretz* is also about being on time. When the appointment is for 11:00, it means being there at 11:00. To arrive late is to announce to the other person that we don’t think that their time is valuable. Included in this category is answering an RSVP. The simple act of responding to an invitation is an act of caring and consideration. And doing so that the person extending the invitation does not have to call us for a response is an essential part of *Derekh Eretz.*

*Derekh Eretz* is about being generous. Generous with our money to help those who have less; to support organizations that help to make this world better. Generous with our time in helping out a friend, answering a question, researching a problem for another, coaching a team, volunteering at a school, or local club. Generous with gifts toward others: a recipe, a great book, not just a book suggestion but the book, itself. Generous in praising others. Generous in letting others go first.

There is the story told of a man who decided to walk from the East to the West Coast. It took him nearly a year. At the end of his journey, he was asked what had caused him the biggest problems on his transcontinental walk. He replied that it wasn’t the heat; and it wasn’t the cold; nor the rugged terrain. What gave him the greatest problem were the small pebbles that got into his shoes that made walking more difficult. Think of that as a metaphor: Each act of incivility is a pebble on our journey through life. Conversely, each act of *Derekh Eretz*: holding a door open, letting someone into our lane, watching our language, reducing our gossip, smiling and greeting another, being on time, being generous, makes our journey smoother.

Taken together, these two Jewish practices of *Derekh Eretz* and *Olam Hesed* remind us that we manifest our commitment to our collective responsibilities through the simplest and most mundane of actions.

“*Hayom harat olam*: Today, the world stands at birth.” Once a year, every year, we come together to reﬂect on the state of our lives and to reevaluate our priorities. More importantly, we come together to challenge ourselves to renew our lives through our priorities.

The epidemic of rudeness and incivility, of self-righteousness and self-centeredness is both a failure both of individual will and of collective responsibility. On Rosh Hashanah, we Jews come together to try to restore our collective character through our individual actions.

Going against the rising tide of incivility is not easy. But the New Year offers us an opportunity to move ourselves—and to move our world—in a kinder and more considerate direction. Let this New Year be one in which each one of us finds ways to practice the words of the Psalmist: *Olam ẖesed yibaneh*: We **can** build a world of caring, kindness and concern. And we can do so through our most mundane of actions—by practicing *Derekh Eretz—*by committing to do the right thing in small and steady ways. May this year be one in which our collective character is strengthened through the many acts of kindness that we perform. So that civility will be strengthened, and so that kindness will endure.

*Kein yi’he ratzon.* So may it be.

*Shana Tova Tikateivu—*May we merit being inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life.