

Once upon a time, there was a family by the name of Cleaver. The family was made up of upright father Ward, self-effacing mother June, and two near perfect sons, Wally and Beaver. Ward worked at the bank everyday to provide for his family, but was always home for dinner every night, ready to teach his children ethical lessons as it related to their lives. June balanced keeping a spotless home with making nutritious meals and assuring that her sons had freshly baked cookies for an after school snack. Wally and Beaver were good sons, although they sometimes strayed from the expected path. They called their parents ma'am and sir and when punished, went off to their rooms without a fight. They played after school sports without competition, did their homework without complaint and ate everything on their plates, complimenting their mother on her fine cooking.

In the idealized television world of the 1950's "Leave it to Beaver", bake sales conquered the community's woes and conflict was always resolved in half an hour. Dinner was always a family affair and the only things that children had to worry about were dealing with a pimple, making the football team and finding a date for the prom.

Such a time and a place never existed, except in the mind of a yearning television viewing audience. Our present reality is much more challenging than the Cleaver's could have even imagined. In many American households, both parents work to support their families and are lucky to find even one evening a week to for a home-cooked meal or to put their children to bed with a story.

One of my best friends quit her high paying consulting job in Dallas, Texas, when she realized that her son called for the nanny before he called for mommy and that daddy was a picture on the refrigerator who he saw on weekends. Although she and her husband had to struggle to make ends meet, they both felt that it was worth the

sacrifice. Many of us do not even have this choice- especially during this economic slump.

Along with giving our teen and tween aged children a healthy breakfast, we remind them to stay away from drugs and alcohol, to walk with groups of other students, and to avoid situations which make them uneasy. And until they return, secure in our arms again, we rightfully worry about their safety.

During the past year, our daily news was saturated with stories reflecting violence, fear, anguish and moral outrage in this country and abroad. Children in California, New York and Florida once again entered schools with guns, and opened fire on their peers and teachers with no regard for human life. Anti Semitic, anti-Arab and hate related crimes were reported three times as often as they had been pre- September 11th.

Two sets of snipers in the DC area randomly picked off people as they went about their daily routines. Sars and West Nile Virus, according to the papers and evening news, were tremendous threats to us all- and many people bought into the scare, loading up on Cipro and face masks.

Hundreds of young men and women in our armed forces were killed in post war Iraq after peace was supposed to have been established. Tens of our brothers and sisters in Israel and the Middle East were murdered by targeted Terrorist bombings. Restaurants, nightclubs and theatres in Bali, Singapore, Russia, Afghanistan, Mumbai, the Philippines, as well as several synagogues in France and England were all been fire bombed by militant elements.

We live in a time where children buy guns instead of baked goods and preschoolers need to hold hands with policemen to escape madmen. We live in a time where we are required to remove our shoes in airports and go through metal detectors to enter public buildings. We live in a time where a gun permit is an equal form of identification to a picture driver's license or a passport at the DMV, where a nail file or a compact mirror is a deadly weapon. Where the premise of the film Thirteen is based on a true story written by a thirteen year old girl, the book The Lovely Bones, about the rape and murder of a 14 year old girl has remained on the New York Times

Bestseller list for two years, and the most popular television shows either depict reality at its cruelest or focus on solving crimes connected to the murdered or missing. Due to this fostered culture of fear, we learn not to trust others, choosing to see ourselves and our families as separate from the world around us. Rather than belonging to the world, we see the world and all its gifts as belonging to us, which makes pushing away our innate moral code easy.

The core of courtesy is what Judaism calls Derech Eretz- the way of the land, translated in Modern Hebrew as common decency. Derech eretz is a manner of relating to, and acknowledging the innate humanness and worth of every being. We are all created B'Zelem Eloheim, in the image of God which makes us like God, responsible for each and every person on this earth.

Derech Eretz is such an important way of living that there are more than 200 teachings in the Talmud regarding how we should treat others. The third chapter of Pirke Avot states “im ayn derech eretz, ayn Torah” if one does not behave with morals and ethics, one does not have his share of Torah. Taking this one step further, Rabbi Jonah in the 12th century comments that God’s presence cannot rest on any person who does not live a righteous life. If we do not exist with a sense of the innate holiness of those around us, any mitzvot that we perform are negated. Studying Torah, keeping Shabbat, donating tzedakah do not count if we are not compassionate and respectful to other human beings.

In the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, tradition tells us to begin to heal any wounds that we may have caused another with our words or through our actions. We accomplish this by standing before those who we have hurt and asking for forgiveness with a sense of remorse and a willingness to change our behaviors. A cursory apology is not considered repentance. Nor is only approaching those we see as equals. Repentance means that we truly comprehend derech eretz, common decency, and vow to see every soul, every soul, as created in the image of God.

Two of this year's Barnes and Nobles highly recommended books, "If I get to Five: What Children Can Teach Us About Courage and Character" by Dr. Fred Epstein, and "Life's Greatest Lessons: 20 things That Matter" by Hal Urban closely echo the concepts in Robert Fulgrum's New York Times Bestseller "Everything I Needed to Know, I learned in Kindergarten". The purpose of these books-- to explain how early childhood education teaches us the most important lessons for living a grown up moral life.

By the age of 5, most of us understood derech erez and what it means to see others as created in the image of God. As adults, we often forget these lessons and needed to be reminded: how to say please and thank you, that sharing is paramount, everyone gets a turn if we wait patiently, to clean up after we make a mess, to use our words, and to hold hands when we cross the street. These lessons are essential for creating community and battling the culture of fear. When we live with a sense of childlike holiness, everyone and everything becomes sacred.

Say please/ say thank you or offering brachot, blessings. Pirke Avot 4:1 teaches who is rich? The one who has the ability to be happy with his or her lot.

My nephew Sam is just beginning to speak in full sentences. His favorite word which he uses often, is please, or in Sam's language pees which he says when he wants just about anything. The game comes from trying to determine what each pees is in regards to. Sam, do you want to read a book? Play with bubbles? Eat melon? Watch Blues Clues? Find the cats? Sam cannot completely articulate his desires, but he fully comprehends that word pees is the first key to getting what he needs.

Please and thank you are the core curriculum of courtesy 101. They are the almost the first words that every child learns to say and yet, as we become grown-ups, we often forget to use them. When we say please and thank you, we acknowledge the freedom of others to choose to act. We don't assume that people will automatically do as we demand; rather we ask them to consider our request and act favorably upon it. Asking with a please and following with a thank you, changes a contact from the most mundane to the most holy because we are reminded that we work in partnership with every living soul around us. When we get too busy to acknowledge our dependence upon others, we are too busy for our own good and the good of the world. Always moving forward to the next task on the agenda, without pausing to look back in gratitude, causes self importance to blind us to the revolutionary truth of things: no one owes us anything- especially those who work for and with us. When we recognize this fact, our perception of the people around us changes dramatically.

Our Rabbis taught that the first words out of a Jew's mouth each morning should be modeh Ani, thank You God for allowing me to awake after another night of sleep. This is just one of the many hundreds of Brachot, statements of thanks that Judaism prescribes daily. Saying Baruch keeps foremost in our minds, the awareness of the holy potential of life, awakening us to all that is good and allowing us to stop and experience a moment of contentment. Rather than reaching out for more, we pause to enjoy what we have. Reciting Baruch, blessed, reminds us that we belong to the world, instead of seeing the world as belonging to us. When we say please and thank you, we are actually stating, blessed are you the one who has helped me at this moment. Each and every soul that we encounter from the woman at Starbucks to the man working behind the dry cleaner's counter deserves this blessing.

Hakol B'Zman: Don't push everyone gets a turn.

Most mornings, I listen to the Today show with a sense of disbelief at what people the world over can do to each other. Several weeks ago, there was a small Story about an incident of road rage in California. A business woman, driving home from the office hit the kind of traffic only found in LA and Long Island. She was already frustrated from the day's many meetings, and wanted to get home to her

children, when she noticed that the man in the Mercedes in front of her was speaking animatedly on the cell phone. Her anger was fueled by his seeming cheerfulness. When traffic inched forward several inches, the Mercedes driver stayed at a standstill, too busy with his phone call to notice. Another car was able to move into their lane. Aggravated, the woman beeped her horn several times and the Mercedes moved. After this had happened three times, she waited until the Mercedes had caught up with the car in front of him and then slammed on her gas, causing an enormous ten car pile up. Needless to say, although feeling some relief from her anger, the woman was even later getting home and had to explain to her insurance company how the accident occurred. Waiting is difficult. We get stuck in traffic on the Long Island Expressway or the interminable lights on route 25, there are lines at the supermarket, the bank, the library and each moment that we are

Forced to wait, we feel as if someone is stealing our much needed time. This of course leads to frustration and anger which is then released on an innocent target. Try to get on a New York City Subway at rush hour. People become animals, pushing into the car with a complete disregard for those before them. Perhaps they feel that if they bulldoze someone else, they will get to where they need to go faster. But here is the sobering reality. When we thrust and shove our way through life, we might be running past the very happiness we seek. In our eagerness to get to the next engagement, we miss the experiences of the present, taking for granted the people and things around us, allowing the coil of impatience to wind ever more tightly. And then we elbow our way forward. We might be very successful at shoving people and things out of the way, but we also shove them right out of our lives. Judaism tells us, *hakol b'zman*, everything in its own time. We will get to where we want to be, when we are supposed to be there, when we can understand the meaning and the importance of that time and place coming together. This is the reason the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years before entering the Promised Land. The best things in life take time to experience. They cannot be seized with an immediacy rather received with patience. Only then can we understand the true meaning of the gift. *HaKol B'zman*, everything will come to us, in its time, there is no need to push ahead. *Rachamim*, if you don't have anything nice to

say than don't say anything at all. The Talmud teaches: In insulting another you insult yourself, for it is your own defect that is revealed.

In the Oscar winning documentary, *Bowling for Columbine*, Michael Moore looks deeply at America's obsession with guns. He focuses much of the film on the brutal killing in Columbine perpetrated by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, showing shakily taped video of the day and interviewing acquaintances of the murderous teens. Although we will never know the real reason behind Harris and Klebold's appalling actions, Moore shows press clips which hypothesize that the two killed because of video games, Marilyn Manson music, and hazing by other students. The teenage assassins were called freaks and made to feel as if they were outside the norm, and so they proved that they were outside the norm. There is no excuse for innocently taking a life; but children do react to what they see around them.

Video games, music, news programs have the potential of effecting our dealings only when we are not taught responsibility and accountability. If we look around and see that others are doing it, whatever it is becomes okay and mob mentality supercedes instilled values.

On May 25<sup>th</sup> many "nice Jewish girls" from the Chicago suburb of Northbrook- much like Port Washington- were charged with criminal behavior when a powder-puff football game between Senior and Junior girls turned ugly. The game, which was a high school tradition, resulted in the younger girls beaten into the mud with beer bottles and covered with feces. 15 students were taken to the hospital for broken bones and stitches, and their tormentors lawyered up, facing the press in Gucci and Chanel suits stating that they hoped the incident would not affect their college acceptances. Watching these teenage girls facing the television cameras full on without fear, disrespectfully chewing gum, looking a bit bored, we knew that they knew that this little incident would not affect their lives in the least. And that money would buy them protection. There was no lesson learned and parents continued to perpetuate their children's belief that the world revolved around them.

Children are extremely cruel to one other and quickly learn what hurts most. They blurt out fat and stupid or I hate you before attempting to explain their own feelings of anger, powerlessness or fear. In a class discussing peer pressure, I was once told by a popular eighth grade girl that the only way to maintain her status was to make fun of someone else. Another student echoed this sentiment stating that it was healthy to point out another person's flaws because, in his own words, "If I keep pointing out to someone that they are not intelligent, or lazy or fat, or whatever their problem is, then they will change. I am helping them, he stated with belief, not hurting them." I guess he forgot the axiom, "If you don't have anything nice to say, then don't say anything at all." Sticks and stones do break our bones, and names do hurt us.

Our children do not learn this lesson in a vacuum. We need to constantly remind them and ourselves that words have the power to destroy or to create depending upon how they are used. We can convey rachamim, compassion, or we can destroy relationships and egos. We are very powerful. How we speak with and listen to each other reveals much about who we are. In Leviticus Rabba it is taught that there are two hallways in which a person is judged. In the realm of holiness, there is the hallway of innocence. In the realm of the unholy, there is the hallway of guilt. Rabbi Shonni Leibowitz explains that the difference between the two lies in each person's perception. If we treat others with rachamim, compassion, we are standing in the realm of holiness. When we judge another unkindly, then we place ourselves in the realm of the unholy.

With an awareness of the words which come from our mouths, and what we are creating when we utter them, speaking is transformed into an act of holiness. God said "Let there be light" and there was light. We, created in the image of God, can also use our words to create light.

Rabbi Yossi Ber of Brisk always had a snuffbox on his table. When he was about to converse with someone, he would first open his box, glance within, study the person across from him, and then begin to speak. His disciples noticed their master's actions and yearned to know what was in the box. They hypothesized for weeks, until curiosity got the best of them and they finally broke down and asked the rabbi. With a smile on his face, he opened the box and showed them the inscription, "He too is created in the image of God."

Ah revin, Hold hands when you cross the street. The Talmud states, when one member of Israel hurts, we all bleed. The Hebrew word for responsibility is ah revin, literally surety or one who makes himself responsible for another. As part of a community, we are commanded to be the guarantors for each others lives; to take care of each other through times of crisis and times of joy, to hold each other's hand as we cross the street. Our rabbis have taught that "when someone is in trouble, and his neighbor separates himself from the situation, then the two angels which accompany every person come and place their hands upon the neighbor's head and say, "You who separated yourself from the community shall not witness its deliverance. Only the one who shares in the distress of the community will merit a part in the world to come." When we reach out to others we help bring nearer the Messianic ideal. Participating in Tikkun Olam, repair of the world is our responsibility, not an extra curricular activity.

Last year's mitzvah day was a tremendous success, but the concepts of mitzvah day, need to occur on an every day basis. We have a number of synagogue committees that reach out to those in need. They need you to assure their success. The mitzvah committee, which organized Mitzvah Day, help us through times of despair and those of joy. They write letters to those who have experienced loss, prepare meals for those dealing with illness, drive the elderly homebound to appointments and send gifts to the families of newborn babies and welcoming packages to new members as well as performing numerous other caring acts. There will be a newly reinvigorated

social justice corps that will speak on behalf of those who cannot speak in our midst and around the world. Men's club and Sisterhood continually reach out to help those in need. Our teenagers can participate in monthly tikkun olam projects and students of every age will be working within our community to make a difference in our world. We are tremendously advantaged and greatly blessed, and it is our responsibility as Jews to help those who are suffering. Realistically the problems in our society will not change through simple kindness. A smile cannot take away guns in school; a kind word will not prevent road rage. But being a human being in a sometimes inhumane environment will change how we view the world and how we live as part of it. Derech erez, common decency is more than manners, it's seeing the world as holy, and recognizing that every person is created in the image of God even the woman who cuts us off in traffic, or the man who pushes us on to the train. Their holiness may be concealed at the moment but its there and it's real. And it deserves to be honored with human kindness.

The lessons of kindergarten: baruch... say please, say thank you... hakol bzman...don't push, we all get a turn.... rachamim ... if you don't have anything nice to say, then don't say anything at all and ah revin ... hold hands when you cross the street don't create human worth, they bear witness to human worth. And help us to protect the most valuable gift of all, each other. Rabbi Zalman Schacter Shalomi tells of how traditionally when a man or woman became a king or a queen, one needed to have a halo that others could recognize in order to call them by their title. So they had a crown made that glowed and shone. When they wore the crown on their head it said, "Look at me, see how I shine. See how important I am." As the children of God we are all light bearers. When we touch the infinite though derech erez there is no need for us to wear the crown, for we already radiate the light of God. May we continue to see the light in humanity, finding hope in the darkness. Our world, the world that we are creating for our children and our grandchildren can be different when we enter into a covenant of partnership with each other and with God.