

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates -- Rabbi Ze'ev Smason -- During the High Holidays, 2013

Dear Beyond Twelve Gates reader,

I hope you and your family experienced a meaningful Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. As we approach Sukkos, Shmini Atzeres and Simchas Torah, I'd like to wish you a Chag Sameach and joyous holidays. Below find a copy of the sermon I delivered on Yom Kippur at Yizkor. I look forward to resuming Beyond Twelve Gates following the conclusion of the holidays in October.

Warmly, Rabbi Ze'ev Smason

*p.s. If you interested in receiving a copy of my weekly sermon, please drop me a line at
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p.p.s. The annual Rabbi Ride-Around is scheduled for October 20; details to follow!

Yom Kippur Sermon - "Customer Service"

His name was Charles, and he was born in 1873 to Swedish immigrants. When he was still quite young, Charles and family relocated to Dixon, Illinois -- later to become the boyhood home of Ronald Reagan. As a young adult he lost part of a finger in an accident at a shoe factory. The doctor who treated him persuaded him to become an apprentice for a local druggist. Later Charles went to Chicago, where he became a registered pharmacist, and eventually came to own a small drugstore.

But for some reason, Charles hated his work, and he spent his mornings looking for something better to do while spending his afternoons at the ball park.

Finally Charles decided it was foolish to live like that, so he decided to quit moping and begin to build his business by giving the best service possible.

In keeping with his new outlook, when a customer who lived near called in an order on the telephone, Charles would repeat each item being ordered while his assistant would hurriedly fill out the order sheet. With the order filled, the owner would keep the customer on the line while the delivery boy dashed out the front door. When the delivery boy reached the customer's house, the customer would still be on the line with Charles. She would excuse herself for a minute to answer the door. Coming back to the phone, the customer would express great surprise and appreciation at the quickness with which the order was delivered.

News got around about the drugstore that filled orders so promptly, and soon Charles expanded his business and started a second store came in 1909 Oh. I didn't mention Charles' last name. You've probably heard it before. It was: Walgreen. By 1916 Charles Rudolph Walgreen owned nine drug stores and was well on his way to building the nationwide chain of pharmacies. The hallmark of Walgreens was outstanding customer service.

For any business, customer service is a key part of its job, and should not be seen as an extension of it. A company's most vital asset is its customers. Without them, they simply can't exist in business. Yet sometimes, even decent customer service may be hard to find.

In her book *The Corn of Wheat*, Gladys Nash relates an experience when her car broke down in the middle of nowhere. After a long wait she noticed a service vehicle approaching and motioned for the driver to stop. When he inspected her stalled car, he quickly discovered it needed a new water hose. He said he would go to town for a replacement, then return and install it for her.

Relieved, Gladys waited ... and waited ... and waited, but the man didn't return. "For sure he forgot about me," she muttered to herself. Finally, he showed up. Exasperated, she asked, "Where have you been all this time?" He replied, "Well, I had to go home and have dinner."

Remembering the incident, Gladys exclaimed, "My dinner! I ask you, what service!"

While the principles and moving parts of amazing customer service might be hard to define, we all know good customer service when we experience it. Each of us have stories of both outstanding and lousy experiences with airlines, home repairmen, and cashiers.

At this point you might be asking yourself, "Customer Service. Hmm. An interesting topic. But what does it have to do with Yom Kippur?"

It's true that if you look in the Viduy (confessional prayer) you won't find, "For the sin which we have committed before you for not giving good customer service." I've gone through the entire Viduy for a number of years, and I can promise you that no where will you find the words 'customer service'!

There is, however, a word for 'customer service' in Hebrew. That word is: chesed is often translated as 'kindness'. From this perspective, then, the Viduy is FILLED with references to customer service. In it we make reference to past mistakes such as:

.....disrespect for parents and teachers

..... using coercion

..... impurity of speech (hurt feelings)

.....false denial, lying

..... evil talk about another (slander, gossip)

.....unscrupulous business dealings

.....scheming against a fellowman/ friend

..... causeless hatred

In my remarks today, therefore, I'd like explore four ways we can use 'customer service' as a paradigm for improving our observance of the great mitzvah of chesed.

1) Everyone knows what it's like calling a company's customer service department: If you're unlucky, you're routed to Asia where an outsourced staff member reads a script in fractured English.

Online retailer Zappos, by contrast, has 500 employees in a call center in Las Vegas who have all received seven weeks of training on how to make customers happy. The company (now a unit of Amazon) has been called "insane" and "fanatical" for the way it will do anything to please its customers. The stories are legendary, and are a key part of its brand:

Last March, a customer service rep physically went to a rival shoe store to get a specific pair of shoes for a woman staying at the Mandalay Bay hotel in Vegas when Zappos ran out of stock. The same year, it overnighed a free --free! -- pair of shoes to a best man who had arrived at a wedding shoeless. A woman meant to return some shoes to Zappos, but her mom passed away and wasn't able to get to it. Zappos arranged to have UPS come pick up the shoes—and then sent her flowers:

The woman said:

It was a beautiful arrangement in a basket with white lilies and roses and carnations. Big and lush and fragrant. I opened the card, and it was from Zappos. I burst into tears. I'm a sucker for kindness, and if that isn't one of the nicest things I've ever had happen to me, I don't know what is.

Zappos makes customers feel important and appreciated. Zappos treats their customers as individuals. Should we do any less with others? As Jews, we have an obligation to appreciate our fellow man for no reason other than every person is created b'tzelem Elokim -in the image of G-d.

Along similar lines my father-in-law Dr. Irwin Siegel wrote a marvelous book titled, "On Being a Doctor: Essays on the Art and Science of Medical Practice". In a chapter titled 'Seeing', Dr. Siegel wrote:

Make eye contact with your patient. Eye contact is the most important nonverbal communication after smiling. It conveys that you are paying attention, not distracted by your notes or something else on your mind. The eyes are the gateway to the soul, and direct eye contact conveys a feeling of honesty, caring, kindness and compassion. Look at the patient, not at the computer. The first thing I ask a student after he has a patient contact is, "What color were his eyes?"

Like Zappos, and like a good doctor, treat people as individuals. Smile. Notice them. -- not just 'to make the sale' or because it's your job -- but because they're a human being, in the image of G-d.

2) It was the late 1940s. Eastern Airline's chair, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, had a problem. Customers were complaining because the airline was mishandling luggage far too often. When nothing else seemed to work, he decided to take drastic action.

Rickenbacker called a special meeting of the management personnel in Miami. Eastern's management flew to Miami and was told their baggage would be delivered to their hotel rooms. Instead, Rickenbacker had the luggage stored overnight.

It was summer, the weather was hot and humid and the hotel had no air-conditioning. The various managers showed up to the meeting the next morning unshaven, teeth unbrushed and wearing dirty clothes.

There was no sign of the baggage all that day. But that night Rickenbacker had it delivered, at 3:00 a.m., with a great pounding on all the doors.

He opened the next morning's session by saying, "Now you know how the customer feels when you mishandle his luggage." He knew his team would be ineffective until his people empathized with their customers!

The same is true with us. Until we really understand someone else's problem, we will never be effective in giving 'Good Customer Service' -- in business -- or relationships.

The Torah requires us to be empathetic, not simply sympathetic. The mishna in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of the Fathers) says that one of the 48 ways with which the Torah is acquired is through being nosay b'ol chaveiro -- to carry the burden of your friend. What's the difference between sympathy and empathy?

When Ronald Reagan was first campaigning for the Presidency, he was confronted at one of his appearances by an 80-year-old woman. She stood up in the audience and commented on his speech, then asked, "What about the old folks? Haven't you forgotten us?"

Reagan was already one of the oldest men to ever campaign for and later win the Presidency. He simply smiled at her and answered gently, "Forget you? Heavens, how could I ever forget you? I am one of you!"

Sympathy and empathy are both acts of feeling. But with sympathy you feel for the person; you're sorry for them or pity them, but you don't specifically understand what they're feeling. You extend your sympathies. But when it comes to empathy, it takes imagination, work, or possibly a similar experience to get to empathy. Empathy can best be described as feeling with the person. Notice the distinction between for and with.

The deepest understanding occurs when we actually sense what the other is feeling. When husbands and wives, parents and children, friends, colleagues, and associates take time to feel what the other is feeling, something wonderful is likely to happen.

Understand your 'customers' by feeling what they're feeling. That's part of great customer service.

3) Earlier we said that great customer service means you should make customers feel important and appreciated. The corollary of this is: Don't be judgmental. If we're honest with ourselves, we in the Jewish world we don't do a very good job at this -- particularly with people who we perceive as being less religious or less observant than ourselves.

It must be puzzling to people of other faiths to discover how many Jewish groups there are -- each one convinced that theirs is the true way.

Several years ago I was curious as to how many Jewish denominational labels there are. I did some research on three Jewish Dating sites (but didn't register!). Here's what I found:

Unaffiliated, Secular, Reconstructionist, Underconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, Conservadox, Traditional, Traditional & Growing, Modern Orthodox Liberal, Modern Orthodox Machmir, Yeshivish Modern, Yeshivish Black Hat, Chassidic, Carlebachian, Orthodox (frum), Orthodox (ba'al tshuva), Shomer Mitzvot, Spiritual, Will tell you later, willing to convert, Another stream, Cub fans (just kidding).

Leaving out 'Jewish Cub Fans', there are 21 different types of Jews!

They tell the story of one boy who was asking his friend about synagogues: "Which abomination do you belong to?"

And then there's the story of the woman goes to the post office to buy stamps for her Chanukah cards. She says to the clerk, "May I have 50 Chanukah stamps?" The clerk says, "What denomination?" The woman replies, "Oh my. Has it come to this? Give me 6 Orthodox, 12 Conservative and 32 Reform."

If you go to a synagogue or Temple for the first time, you aren't always met with the warmest of welcomes. I can't tell you how many times people have told me that they've visited a synagogue or Temple and have said: "People won't talk to me." "Clique-ish", "Unfriendly", or "They said four words to me: You're in my seat."

So who are we -- and what does it mean to be Jewish?

I've never met a Jew who said he or she wanted to be an Orthodox Jew. However, I have met many who want to be better Jews. A Jew is a Jew, regardless of Jewish education or observance. If we remember that, we'll be able to give our fellow Jews better customer service. Let's forget about denominations. Labels are for clothing.

4) As a rabbi, I make far too many shiva calls. But still, it's a mitzvah, and good things come from it. At a shiva house his summer I sat and talked with family. I had officiated at the funeral and had often been by the home during the week. One of the adult grandchildren pulled me aside and told me, "Rabbi, through this whole ordeal, you have exceeded our expectations." That was the greatest professional compliment I received the entire year.

Mavens in the business world say: If you want to hit a home run with your customers, give more than expected. And in this area, they say that Hotel chain Ritz-Carlton is in a category by itself. Many companies mimic its training programs, and one often hears executives saying they want to be known as the "Ritz-Carlton" of their respective industry, be it a law firm, car dealership or plumbing supplier.

My all-time favorite customer service story involves a giraffe -- Joshie the Giraffe.

Chris Hurn sent his family to a Ritz-Carlton resort hotel in Florida for a few days while he remained in California on business. Following a pleasant stay, the Hurn family departed, but left behind their young son's favorite stuffed animal -- Joshie the Giraffe. Back home in California, the young Hurn was distraught and unable to fall asleep without Joshie. Here, in the words of Chris Hurn, is how the story continues:

While trying to put him to bed the first night home, I decided to tell a little white lie. "Joshie is fine," I said. "He's just taking an extra long vacation at the resort." My son seemed to buy it, and was finally able to fall asleep, Joshie-less for the first time in a long while.

That very night, the Ritz-Carlton called to tell us they had Joshie. Thankfully, he had been found, no worse for wear, in the laundry and was handed over to the hotel's Loss Prevention Team. I came clean to the staff about the story I told my son and asked if they would mind taking a picture of Joshie on a lounge chair by the pool to substantiate my fabricated story. The Loss Prevention Team said they'd do it, and I hung up the phone very relieved.

A couple days went by, and we received a package from the hotel. It was my son's Joshie, along with some Ritz-Carlton-branded "goodies" (a frisbee, football, etc.). Also included in the package was a binder that meticulously documented his extended stay at the Ritz.

Chris went on to describe the many unexpected photos in 'Joshie's Vacation Album': 1) Joshie wearing shades by the pool 2) Joshie getting a massage at the spa 3) Joshie making friends with other critters (surrounded by numerous and assorted stuffed animals 4) Joshie driving a golf cart on the beach (who knew giraffes could drive?) 5) Joshie taking a shift in front of the security monitors, having been made an honorary member of the Loss Prevention team -- and even being issued a I.D badge, sent home to the Hurn family as a keepsake.

All the above resulted from a stuffed giraffe that got lost on a vacation -- and created indelible memories of a customer service experience that far exceeded the Hurn family's expectation. Next time the Hurn family needs a hotel, where do you think they'll be staying?

Going beyond the expected is, in fact, a Yom Kippur concept; multiple times throughout the day we describe the Almighty as rav chesed - abundant in kindness (Ex.34:6). Why is G-d referred to as being 'abundant' in kindness? In the chesed bestowed upon us, He certainly gives us far beyond what is deserved or expected.

If you want to exceed expectations, ask yourself the following: With family members, friends, at work, and in synagogue:

What do you give 'the customers' that they cannot get elsewhere? What do you do to follow-up and thank people? What do we give -- and what can we give -- that is totally unexpected?

Charles Rudolph Walgreen got it right: outstanding customer service produces outstanding results. And in our personal lives, we're all in the 'customer service business.' Humanitarian Sir Wilfred T. Grenfell beautifully expressed this concept in the following way:

The service we render to others is really the rent we pay for our room on this earth. It is obvious that man is himself a traveler; that the purpose of this world is not "to have and to hold" but to "give and serve." There can be no other meaning.

Real Judaism is about outstanding customer service. It's called chesed (kindness) and mitzvos bain adam l'chaveiro (our obligations to our fellow man).

If in our 'customer' service to others we:

- 1) Make people feel important and appreciated
- 2) Understand and empathize
- 3) Don't judge, pigeonhole, label and denominate our fellow Jews -- accept them for who they are
- 4) Exceed expectations

And if we do all of the above l'shaym Shamayim -- for the sake of Heaven -- we can transform our communities, our synagogues, our homes, our relationships, and ourselves.

And we will be written, inscribed and sealed for a good year.

*Beyond Twelve Gates' refers to a beautiful concept taught by the great mystic **Rabbi Isaac Luria** (1534-1572), also known as '**The Ari**'. There exist twelve gates of prayers in Heaven - one for each tribe of Israel. Additionally, there exists a Heavenly thirteenth gate. Through this gate the prayers of all Jews regardless of tribe, Jewish education or level of observance are allowed to enter and are heard by G-d.*

We are a community at Nusach Hari B'nai Zion, dedicated to outreach and to the inclusion of all Jews. As such we strongly encourage you to be a part of our social media presence. Along with email, Facebook and Twitter are the new "word of mouth." If you are already a member of either one, please join us there. In addition, it's essential that you encourage your family and friends to follow us on Facebook and Twitter. The more people who join us as a part of our social media conversation, the more people we have an opportunity to reach.

To join us on Facebook go to <http://bit.ly/dtIoA4> and click the "Like" button.

To follow us on Twitter go to <http://twitter.com/NHBZ> and click "Follow."

To follow Rabbi Smason go to <http://twitter.com/pepshortand> click "Follow."

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