

**Drasha/ Sermon Parshas Vayeshev: "Civility"**  
**Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ 12/13/2014**

In 1966, an eleven-year-old black boy named Stephen moved with his parents and family to a white neighborhood in Washington. Sitting with his two brothers and two sisters on the front step of the house, he waited to see how they would be greeted. But they weren't. Passers-by turned to look at them but no one gave them a smile or even a glance of recognition. All the fearful stories he had heard about how whites treated blacks seemed to be coming true. Years later, writing about those first days in their new home, he says, "I knew we were not welcome here. I knew we would not be liked here. I knew we would have no friends here. I knew we should not have moved here . . ."

As he was thinking those thoughts, a white woman coming home from work passed by on the other side of the road. She turned to the children and with a broad smile said, "Welcome!" Disappearing into the house, she emerged minutes later with a tray filled with drinks and cream-cheese and jelly sandwiches which she brought over to the children, making them feel at home. That moment, Stephen later said, changed his life. It gave him a sense of belonging where there was none before. It made him realize, at a time when race relations in the United States were still filled with tension and animosity, that a black family could feel at home in a white area and that there could be relationships that were color-blind. Over the years, Stephen learned to admire much about the woman across the street, but it was that first spontaneous act of greeting that became, for him, a definitive memory. It broke down a wall of separation and turned strangers into friends. It was a great act, he said, of *civility*.

Who was that woman across the street? And what ever became of Stephen? If you're interested, I'll tell you a bit later. But the story of Stephen and the woman across the street brings to the fore the topic of civility -- something that is sorely lacking as we look around today's world.

This past week was a tough one for civility.

Most international airlines based in Asia are known for their high-quality service, down to the smallest detail. At Korean Air, that smallest detail is Macadamia nuts — and the daughter of the airline's Chairman kicked a flight attendant off a flight for serving them improperly. Heather Cho resigned this week and issued a public apology for a completely 'nutty' incident where she kicked a crew chief off a flight at JFK because she was served macadamia nuts in a bag, not a dish. The flight was delayed 20 minutes while officials decided whether to proceed without the ousted employee.

On Friday, the airline's chairman, Cho Yang-ho, said his daughter was being removed from all posts at affiliate companies. She had already quit her position as vice president. "I apologize to the people of this country as chairman of Korean Air and as a father for the trouble caused by my daughter's foolish conduct. I failed to raise the child properly. It's my fault," said Cho, who bowed deeply in front of media crowded in the lobby of the airline's headquarters.

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Moving from macadamia nuts to Chinese cuisine, civility took a further beating with the story of Harvard professor, Ben Edelman. Professor Edelman graduated summa cum laude from Harvard College. He has a Ph.D. in economics from Harvard University, and a law degree from Harvard Law School. Last week, the professor ordered what he thought was \$53.35 worth of Chinese food, and was overcharged by \$4.00.

Professor Edelman went ballistic, insisting that the owner of the Mom & Pop restaurant pay triple damages based upon a Massachusetts consumer protection law. In a series of widely publicized emails, Professor Edelman relentlessly badgered and threatened the contrite restaurant owner, with the professor relenting only when his bullying emails went public.

And civility really took a beating with the revelations of petty, demeaning and racist emails between Sony Pictures executive Amy Pascal, and producer Scott Rudin. And for once, even Al Sharpton was right, comparing the racist emails to recent offensive comments made by Donald Sterling.

The world we live in seems to have lost touch with the things that are truly important: manners, courtesy, connection, friendship and loyalty. These things are all achievable through one simple concept: civility. There's a beautiful example of civility in this week's Torah parsha.

Yosef (Joseph) was arrested and imprisoned. Shortly afterwards, two members of Pharaoh's Court were also thrown into jail. Imagine what it was like to be in jail with two officers of Pharaoh's Court. As an analogy, this would be like having a common criminal in jail together with two members of the President's cabinet. These were 'Cabinet level' people in the Egyptian government – the person who brought Pharaoh his wine, and Pharaoh's personal baker. These were people who could be compared to the Attorney General and the Secretary of State.

They were sitting in jail with a Hebrew slave – the lowest rung of society. We can be sure that there was not a lot of camaraderie and social interaction between Yosef and Pharaoh's officials. The officers had their respective dreams, which upset them. Yosef saw that they were depressed and asked them "Why are you depressed?" The "lowly criminal" (Yosef) comments to the "Secretary of State" (Wine Butler), "You don't look so good this morning!" Because of that remark, because of those few words, what happens?

The dreams are related to Yosef. Yosef interprets the dreams. The Butler sees that Yosef has special interpretive abilities. The Butler is eventually released from jail and, in the time-honored tradition of shamed politicians, gets put back on the 'Cabinet'. Years later, the Butler remembers Yosef. Yosef is brought out of jail. He interprets the dreams of Pharaoh correctly. He becomes the second in command. He feeds the entire world including his own brothers and father.

And the rest – as they say -- is history!

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What started this entire series of events? Four words: "*Madua peneichem ra'im hayom?*" (Why are your faces troubled today?) What is the ethical lesson to be learned here? The lesson is that it is incumbent upon us to be civil. Yosef was concerned about how they looked and how they felt, even though we would need to assume that these were people who wouldn't give Yosef a second look. Merely saying a nice, kind word makes such a difference!

Remember the Mary Poppins song, 'A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down?' It also, apparently even helps a doctor sweeten his diagnosis.

Researchers revealed the results of a study that show how important civility and kindness is in day-to-day relations. In the experiment researchers gave 44 doctors the symptoms of a hypothetical patient and then asked for each doctor's diagnosis of the illness. But the real point of the study wasn't how well the doctors could diagnose illness. Before the experiment began, researchers gave half of the doctors a bag of candy, saying it was a token of appreciation for their involvement in the study. The other doctors received nothing.

Alice Isen, a Cornell psychologist, said the doctors receiving the candy were far more likely to correctly diagnose the patient's problem. "Pleasant-feeling states give rise to altruism, helpfulness, and improved interpersonal processes," she explained.

Joseph's Four words changed history. And just a few of our own words can also change history - "Good Morning!" "How are you?" "How are you doing?" "How was your holiday?" "How is your spouse?" "How are your kids?" These types of words can make a difference. They made a vast difference in Yosef's life and for the Jewish people.

DR. P.M. FORNI is an award-winning professor of Italian Literature at Johns Hopkins University. In 2000 he founded The Civility Initiative at Johns Hopkins and over the years has continued to teach courses on the theory and history of manners. His book *Choosing Civility -- The 25 Rules of Considerate Conduct* -- (2002) has sold more than 100,000 copies. What a beautiful concept: twenty five guidelines for *chesed* (kindness), *derech eretz* (decent behavior), and being a *mensch*. Wouldn't it be wonderful to establish a series of classes and discussions based upon these guidelines? For those interested, here's Dr. Forni's list:

1. Pay attention
2. Acknowledge others
3. Think the best
4. Listen
5. Be inclusive
6. Speak kindly
7. Don't speak ill

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8. Accept and give praise
9. Respect even a subtle "no"
10. Respect others' opinions
11. Mind your body
12. Be agreeable
13. Keep it down (and rediscover silence)
14. Respect other people's time
15. Respect other people's space
16. Apologize earnestly
17. Assert yourself
18. Avoid personal questions
19. Care for your guests
20. Be a considerate guest
21. Think twice before asking for favors
22. Refrain from idle complaints
23. Accept and give constructive criticism
24. Respect the environment and be gentle
25. Don't shift responsibility and blame

Whatever happened to Stephen, the young black man, and the woman across the street?

The young man, Stephen Carter, eventually became a law professor at Yale and wrote a book about what he learned that day. He called it *Civility*. The name of the woman, he tells us, was Sara Kestenbaum, and she died all too young. He adds that it was no coincidence that she was a religious Jew. "In the Jewish tradition," he notes, such civility is called "*chesed* – the doing of acts of kindness – which is in turn derived from the understanding that human beings are made in the image of God." Civility, he adds, "itself may be seen as part of *chesed*: it does indeed require kindnesses toward our fellow citizens, including the ones who are strangers, and even when it is hard." To this day, he adds, "I can close my eyes and feel on my tongue the smooth, slick sweetness of the cream cheese and jelly sandwiches that I gobbled on that summer afternoon when I discovered how a single act of genuine and unassuming civility can change a life forever."

When Hashem tells us to be kind to others, as always, He has a good idea. Civility & kindness is G-d's program for making our world work better -- and for transforming us into more G-dly, holy people.