

Rosh HaShanah 5783 Sermon

Compassion Is Good Medicine For YOU

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Good morning.

Over the past few months, I've asked many people one important question: What is your greatest concern?

Most people will voice a few options, as if trying them on for size: Climate Change. Poverty. Politics. But then shake their heads 'no,' because although they have many concerns about the world, almost always their *greatest* concern is much more personal.

What do you think most teenagers say is their greatest concern?

Almost always, their answer is... 'mental health.' At first this was surprising to me, but it makes sense. These last few years have made our society a very confusing place. The pandemic forced our kids into remote learning and canceled years of their enrichment activities. At the time of their lives when they were supposed to be developing social skills, they were isolated, and it is still taking its toll. Our young people have skyrocketing rates of anxiety and depression. And so, no wonder that their greatest concern is their mental health.

How about adults over 50 years old? What do you think that their greatest concern tends to be?

Almost always, their answer is... 'having their health, and living a long life.'

Is this important to you? Me too. And guess what, that is what the High Holidays are all about.

If we were to pick a mantra, or a tag-line, for the High Holidays, it probably would be the words from Yom Kippur's Torah reading: "Choose Life!" Each year we read the words:

רְאֵה נַתַּתִּי לַפְּנֵיךָ הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַחַיִּים וְאֶת־הַטּוֹב וְאֶת־הַמּוֹת וְאֶת־הָרָע:

וּבַחֲרָתְךָ בַּחַיִּים...

“See- I have placed before you today the life and the good, or the death and the evilⁱ...so choose life...ⁱⁱand, ‘be a blessing.’”

Over the centuries, some sages have concluded that rather than see this choice as God handing out rewards and punishments, it is actually a matter of logic and consequence. To ‘choose life’ means to connect with compassion to the people around you; and to ‘be a blessing’ means to actively seek to make a difference in their lives. It stands to reason that if we do this, then we will positively influence our home, our friendships, our community, and the world. But the part that we often miss is that ‘being a blessing’ for others, directly helps you too. Our sacred texts convey that increased altruism leads to healthier and longer lives.ⁱⁱⁱ

Modern science backs this claim up, not as a hope or a prayer, but as a fact of neurobiology. Compassionate acts of ‘giving back,’ done over a sustained period of time, will drastically improve your mental health, your physical health, and your length of years.

The first example of what it means to ‘be a blessing’ is Abraham and Sarah. They were living in the land of Haran, which our tradition tells us was all about the ‘self’, what today we would call an extreme ‘me’ culture. The parallels to modern American society cannot be ignored.

Remember the cover of Time Magazine^{iv} that named the Person Of The Year with a mirror reflecting YOU as the center of the universe? This issue was highlighting our obsession with social media and posting selfies as a culture of narcissism.

Like America, everything in Haran was about ‘me’, not about ‘we’. And so, the people of Haran lived a life disconnected from one another, chasing after instant gratification, in hopes that it would bring them happiness. It never did.

God calls out to Abraham and Sarah, “*Lech Lecha*”, *lechi Lach*,” -“Take yourself forward” into the world, and care for the people you encounter. Look for opportunities to connect with them and be a force of good. Seek to improve the world one personal interaction at a time, then **וְיָרַחְךָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ** /“you shall be a blessing.”^{vi}

God’s command to Abraham and Sarah comes with a profound realization that life must be more than just existing for the sake of ourselves.

There is this great scene^{vii} described in Torah where Abraham is sitting in his tent, recovering from circumcision, and talking with God. It's a hot desert day, the air dusty and bone-dry. In the distance, he spots travelers, wearily putting one foot in front of another. With chutzpah that is nothing short of admirable, Abraham breaks off his conversation with God, ignores his physical discomfort, and leaves the shade of his tent to bring the weary travelers into the shelter of his own home. There, he proceeds to wash their feet, as Sarah brings them food and water. These men were not family. They were not even neighbors. They were strangers in need of help. The message is powerful. Serving others with compassion is good medicine for you.

I love when Judaism and current scientific research intersect. It lights me up.

Moses Maimonides,^{viii} who is considered the greatest Jewish mind of the last 1,000 years, was both a famous rabbi and a prominent physician. He believed that both Judaism and science were essentially two sides of the same coin. They both seek to find Truth.

And so I want to tell you a story^{ix} about two contemporary doctors, Anthony Mazzealli, who is the chief medical officer of a hospital^x with 8,500 employees; and Steve Trzeciak, an ICU doctor, who often meets people on the worst day of their lives.

Both doctors had been taught that, in order to succeed, they could not get emotionally attached to their patients. This conventional wisdom is familiar to us outside of healthcare. It says that if we care too much, then we are left exposed and vulnerable. It is more clinically efficient to be impersonal, and objective, and removed. Doctors everywhere were taught that creating impenetrable boundaries and 'not caring' would ultimately help the most people and protect them as individuals. But Anthony and Steve's personal experiences during the Covid pandemic caused them to question this, and ultimately through their research, to reach a very different conclusion that has profound implications for everyone here today.

We all remember that during the first few years of Covid, hospitals were on the verge of being overrun. Too many people needed help all at once. It was a very scary time. Hospitals, like all systems, are made up of real people. And health care workers were running on fumes. Many doctors and nurses began having

intense feelings of numbness and emotional exhaustion known as ‘burn-out.’ It is described as “a dark feeling of depersonalization that is so bad that that no matter how hard you try, you feel that you cannot make a difference.”^{xi}

Of course, burn-out is not limited to hospitals. Many of us feel ‘burn out’ because the world seems so precarious, and life demands so much from us. In an effort to get everything done, we triage connection...and put up defenses against compassion so that we don’t feel exposed.

There was one particular evening after a really tough day where Steve had lost a 19-year-old patient. Driving home that night, he felt numb. He felt empty. And said to himself “I don’t know if I can do this anymore.’

Steve could barely admit it to himself, but some part of him feared that he was heading down a dark road^{xii}

Quitting wasn’t a serious consideration as he has four kids and a mortgage, but something had to change. He had to treat his burn-out.

The best research on how to relieve burnout symptoms essentially said to ‘escape’ – to get far away from the hospital and his patients, and spend more time working on himself with yoga, or hikes, or vacations. In other words, if Steve spent less time caring for patients in favor of more - ‘me time’- then his burnout would evaporate, and good cheer would miraculously replace it.^{xiii}

But Steve did not buy that answer. And Judaism does not either. The answer to burnout could not be to run away. How was that a sustainable strategy for him, as the head of his department? He concluded that somehow, he would have to fundamentally change how he approached his work, and his patients, so that he could reverse his sense of hopelessness.^{xiv}

Steve suspected, based on anecdotal experiences, as counter intuitive as it might sound, that caring more, not less, for his patients might be the answer.

And as a researcher, he was genuinely curious, could the effects of ‘compassion’ be measured scientifically?

No one had ever compiled all the research on this subject in one place before. In all, they reviewed more than a thousand scientific papers, and over 280 research studies. Their findings have been nothing short of astounding, in part because

they fly in the face of the mores of modern American society. But their findings fit in very well with the Jewish wisdom, thousands of years old, to 'Choose Life' by 'being a blessing.'

Study after study showed that when the caregivers in the hospital invested even a little more time in each patient as a person, their patients did significantly better than those who were treated with the standard clinical fashion. It could be as simple as asking, 'how are you? And then really taking the time to listen. It was the same doctors and nurses, the same operations, the same medicines, and the same machines. But with VERY different results. When the doctors and nurses cared more, their patients healed at a higher and faster rate; operations were more successful, and even medicines and machines were more effective.^{xv}

What is even more interesting is that when the caregivers intentionally offered compassion, their own mental and physical health was drastically improved.^{xvi}

Steve began conducting himself differently at work. He adopted a mindset of not closing himself off from his patients' human experience; and he was able to protect himself from "burnout by making deeper connections."^{xvii} It turns out that 'serving others with compassion is good medicine for you.'

But would this idea apply, and be measurable, outside of the hospital system with regular people like you and me? Study after study proved that the answer was a resounding yes with results that are profoundly relevant to everyone here today.

For instance, if I told you that if you volunteer your time on a regular basis, you are more likely to live longer, would you pay attention?

Would you consider trying it?

Well, if you are 55 years old and over, and you regularly volunteer at least a little of your time, then you likely will have a 24% lower mortality rate than your peers who do not volunteer at all.^{xviii}

And if you are a "high" volunteer, meaning that you give a lot of your time to help others, then you likely will have a 44% lower mortality rate than your peers who don't volunteer at all.^{xix} Those are big numbers.

The scientific evidence shows that volunteering might be as good for your body and brain as exercise and diet. It is more than just a ‘nice’ thing to do, it could save your life.

You see, when you ‘give back’ your brain receives a flood of neurotransmitters that trigger good feelings. Some of you might know it as ‘helper’s high’,^{xx} kind of like ‘runner’s high’, with similar endorphins. These actively reduce stress and systematic inflammation, both of which weaken your immune system, and can cause heart attacks, diabetes, cancer, and a myriad of other things that you do not want. In other words, serving others with compassion is good medicine for you. It will help you live healthier, and longer.

And what about our kids? I worry about them. I really do. As a group, they are really vulnerable right now. We see it all around us. In our homes, and our schools, at synagogue, and in the workplace. Many of them need support and attention.^{xxi}

Last year, the CDC reported that 63% of young adults struggled with anxiety and depression; 25% of them have had serious thoughts of hurting themselves, or worse.^{xxii}

Therapy and medication are essential, for sure; but there is ample evidence^{xxiii} that adding in the practice of ‘serving others’ might be the key component towards returning them to a place where they can thrive.

Study after study^{xxiv} found that in a short amount of time, when teen-agers were able to ‘give back’ on a regular basis, those endorphins kicked in and their mood lifted. In most cases, this was enough to significantly reduce their anxiety and depression. In other words, giving their time and sharing their compassion gave the teens the boost that they were missing. It was the little extra something that got them back to baseline so that they could feel better, and once more begin to live their best lives.

And I know that some of you are thinking, “gosh, are you really going to add another thing to my busy life?”

The answer is, ‘yes’, but not as one more thing on your ‘to do’ list. Choosing Life is not a task to be checked off, it really is a way of being. It starts in the home,

and extends outward from there to build healthy, connected communities. This is a way for us to reprioritize our approach to our time altogether.

So...come join us on Sundays in Garden Isaiah, growing food that will nourish our neighbors; help us feed children, and women, and families through our work with Zaban, Mary Hall, and the CAC. There are kids in local schools who need a kind soul to help them learn to read, come with us and be that person. There are families from Ukraine and Afghanistan who need to be welcomed; and environmental work that needs you to champion. We have rivers to clean, and interfaith relationships to foster; there is Antisemitism to combat, and inter-racial bridges to build. לֵךְ לְךָ *Lech Lecha/Lechi Lach*, take yourself forward and be a blessing.

God reveals to us that we are each given a choice: either we treat each other with compassion and feel connected, giving us the chance to live our best lives; or the opposite. To our detriment, and to those around us, we can choose to live in self-absorbed, protected silos, which ultimately keep us isolated and disconnected.

Our choice is important. I'm here to tell you that serving others with compassion is not just good for our society, it's good medicine for you.

May the choice that we make allow us to be written into the Book of Life in this New year.

May you, and your family, be blessed...

and may you be a blessing.

Shanah tova.

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- ⁱ Deut 30:15
- ⁱⁱ Deut 30:19
- ⁱⁱⁱ The examples of this in the vast ocean of Jewish text are many. Most poignant for the High Holidays may be the liturgical response to the 'On Rosh HaShanah this is written, on the Fast of Yom Kippur this is sealed: Who shall live and who shall die, who by... but through the return to the right path, through prayer, and through righteous giving, we can transcend the harshness of the decree.
- ^{iv} Time Magazine, December 25, 2006
- ^v Genesis 12:1
- ^{vi} Genesis 12:3
- ^{vii} Genesis 18:1-8
- ^{viii} Moses ben Maimon, aka Rambam (1138-1204)
- ^{ix} Trzeciak M.D., Stephen & Mazzarelli M.D., Anthony (2002). Wonder Drug: 7 Scientifically Proven Ways That Serving Others Is the Best Medicine for Yourself, 1-10
- ^x Anthony Mazzarelli is the chief medical officer (CMO) of Cooper University Health Care- an academic health care system that includes an affiliated medical school, flagship hospital, a Level 1 trauma center, and one hundred other sites in southern New Jersey, now with a \$1.6B in annual revenue and around 8,500 employees.
- ^{xi} WD, p 5
- ^{xii} WD, p5
- ^{xiii} WD, p6
- ^{xiv} WD p 6
- ^{xv} Trzeciak M.D., Stephen, TEDx Talk: Healthcare's Compassion Crisis
- ^{xvi} Trzeciak M.D., Stephen, TEDx Talk: Healthcare's Compassion Crisis
- ^{xvii} WD, p 7
- ^{xviii} WD, p 107 (Okun MA, Yeung EW, Brown S. Volunteering by older adults and risk of mortality: a meta-analysis. *Psychol Aging*. 2013 June; 28 (2): 564-77
- ^{xix} WD, p 107: Oman D, Thoresen CE, McMahon K. Volunteerism and mortality among the community-dwelling elderly. *J Health Psychol*. 1999 May; 4 (3) 301-16
- ^{xx} Luks A. "Helper's high: Volunteering makes people feel good, physically and emotionally." *Psychology Today*, October 1998,32-42
- ^{xxi} 2021 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey reported that 63% of 18-24 yr olds had symptoms of anxiety and depression. 25% were using alcohol and recreational drugs to mitigate stress. The same percentage reported having serious thoughts of suicide.
- ^{xxii} WD, p 123
- ^{xxiii} WD, p 125- A Brigham Young University three-year study of five hundred adolescents found that giving and helping strangers and family members was protective against depression and anxiety symptoms.
- ^{xxiv} WD, 123-136
- Padilla-Walkerr LM, Millett MA, Memmott-Elison MK (2020). Can helping others strengthen teens? Character strengths as mediators between prosocial behavior and adolescents' internalizing symptoms. *J Adolesc* 79L70-80, ISSN 0140-1971
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- Telzer EH, Fuligni AJ, Lieberman MD, Galvan A. Neural sensitivity to eudaimonic and hedonic rewards differentially predict adolescent depressive symptoms over time. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA*. 2014 May 6;111(18):6600-5
- The Very Real Benefits of Teens Giving Back; The Puberty Podcast, Sept 20, 2022
