

**Shanah tovah. May we all be inscribed and sealed for a year of peace, prosperity, goodness, and health. Morris and Freda go out to see Hamilton on Broadway. This, of course, is the most sold out show of the year. Somehow, they've been lucky and they manage to get the best seats, very close to the stage.**

**They know that this show has been sold out for months on end, but strangely enough, they notice that there's an empty seat in the row behind them, a seat that was easily worth a thousand dollars at the going rate.**

**When intermission comes and still no one has taken that seat, Freda turns to the woman sitting next to the empty seat and asks, "Pardon me, but Hamilton has been completely sold out for a year, so we were wondering why that seat next to you is empty. Did your date stand you up or get sick?"**

**The woman says, "No, that's my late husband's seat." Freda is horrified and embarrassed and apologizes for being so insensitive and cruel, and the widow quietly accepts her apology.**

**But a few minutes later, Freda turns around again to talk to the widow. She says "I don't mean to be any crueller than I've been already been with you, but Hamilton is the hardest show to get tickets for. It's such a shame to see a prime seat go to waste! Don't you have a friend or a relative who would have wanted to come and see the show?"**

**The widow says, "All my friends and relatives are at the shiva."**

**All joking aside, cruelty is an unfortunate reality in our world. It is a trait that is unique to human beings. Animals cannot be cruel. Even the most ferocious tiger is not being cruel when it tears into its prey – it is simply doing what tigers do.**

**The Talmud tells us that we humans are half angel and half beast. It is that combination that gives us both the capability of holiness and the possibility of being cruel, even unspeakably so. Only we can be consciously and deviously cruel. Every day, it is up to us to decide which way to go.**

**My message today is that cruelty is something that each of us must strive to eliminate from ourselves and our surroundings. It is difficult to get rid of cruelty, and it always comes back sooner or later. Cruelty is a spiritual fungus, a black mold that grows on our souls and our society.**

**First, I'll start with describing what I mean by cruelty. Then I'll explain why we need to think about it on Rosh Hashanah. Then I'll teach you about several types of cruelty. Finally, I'll suggest the best way to eliminate it from the entire world.**

**What is cruelty? I am obviously not talking about the kind of cruelty that Elvis Presley sang about: Don't be cruel, to a heart that's true. (thank you very much.) Rather, I'm talking about my dictionary's definition of cruelty: Behavior that causes pain or suffering to a person or animal.**

**Why, you might ask, should we talk about cruelty on Rosh Hashanah? The reason is that today's Torah reading is all about God's condemnation of cruelty.**

**God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son, and Abraham blindly agrees, apparently not caring how cruel it would be carry out this order. In yesterday's reading, the Torah tells us that Abraham at least felt bad about expelling Ishmael into the desert. But he expresses no such reservations or regrets regarding the slaughter of Isaac. He's on board, he's slashing necks and cashing checks.**

**If it weren't for the fact that God's angel stopped him at the very last second, Abraham would have gone through with the sacrifice, thus ending the Jewish experiment just after launch.**

**The message of today's Torah reading is that cruelty is strictly forbidden, even and especially when it is done in the service of God.**

**Another reason to talk about cruelty on Rosh Hashanah is that, well, we're Jews and our entire history is the story of a people's struggle against cruelty, from the first day of Egyptian enslavement to the latest rocket attack from Gaza.**

**Cruelty is a major topic in the Tanakh, the Jewish Bible.**

**That shouldn't be a surprise. Cruelty is always on the mind of people who have been oppressed, and we have been oppressed, then as today and today as then.**

**Now let's take a guided tour of the Museum of Cruelty. This museum is a vast place with many things to see. The history of human cruelty literally begins in the Stone Age, when our cave dwelling ancestors slaughtered each other and left mass graves for modern archeologists to find.**

**Let's start with the first exhibit, which is verbal cruelty. This is by far the most common kind of cruelty. In mild cases, verbal cruelty can take the form of a snide or snarky remark about someone's lack of clothing style or a speech impediment.**

**A lot of verbal cruelty stems from a simple confusion. Many people these days confuse humor and mockery. Humor, according to theologian Riehnold Niehbur, stems from noticing things in our existence that don't fit or don't make sense.**

**But mockery is different. Mockery stems from the human desire to pick on someone's weakness or failure and laugh at it. Most of the so-called humor out there is not humor at all but rather mockery, making fun of people for the sake of a Twitter follower or a Facebook like.**

**In more severe cases, this cruel mockery can take the form of a psychological assault on another person's weight, lack of financial success, physical appearance, sexual orientation, or a hundred other different attributes.**

**Very cruel speech can be just as damaging if not more harmful than a physical beating. Some of you may be aware that verbal cruelty leaves bruises and scars that don't fade, cuts that don't heal, and burns that never stop hurting.**

**The worst kind of verbal cruelty is bullying and harassment. We're all cruel on occasion, but for a bully, it's a constant state of being. Now you may have heard that bullies and serial harassers are people who have low self-esteem. That's certainly what I was told. I was told to have pity on bullies and consider how miserable they must be.**

**Well according to a 2015 study, it turns out that's all wrong. According to scientists at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, bullies and harassers have really high levels of self-esteem and low levels of depression. They are awesomely happy campers.**

**That means bullies and harassers often end up being the most powerful, the happiest, the strongest, and the richest. The halls of financial and political power are populated with more than a few cruel, nasty people.**

**But the good news is that cruel people are typically not the smartest knives in the drawer, and that is always their downfall.**

**One person fighting them is an enterprising app developer, a sixteen year old girl, who was featured on Shark Tank because she invented an app that detects verbal cruelty and asks the user if he really wants to send it.**

**That's a brilliant idea. Her app forces people to do the one thing that can often stop verbal cruelty, which is simply thinking twice. We need to think twice and three times before we speak. We need to ask ourselves, "Is what I am about to say a credit to my existence? Does it make me seem more kind?" If the answer is no, we need to tap delete on our phones and in our heads.**

**So that's the first exhibit, run of the mill verbal cruelty. The second exhibit concerns vindictive cruelty, something that is very tempting at times. Vindictive cruelty is the sort that we think is allowed because we feel offended and self-righteous. So we say or think cruel things to make ourselves feel better.**

**The classic story about vindictive cruelty appears in the Talmud. There, we read the story about Rabbi Meir, who lived in a rough neighborhood where local bandits made his life miserable. So he prayed to God that these hooligans would die. His wife, Beruriah, chastised him for being so vindictive and told him that God wants the repentance of sinners, not their deaths.**

**I recently had a similar experience myself. I was a nerd in high school — I know that you're real shocked by that — and this was way before nerds were cool and running the world. The jocks were in charge back then, and one of them liked to bully me back in 1984.**

**So one day last month, just out of curiosity, I googled this guy's name to see what happened to him. I expected one of two things: Either he'd be in the State Assembly and a rich man, or he'd be in prison. And these days in politics, one usually follows the other.**

**You can imagine my surprise when I saw what Google came up with. It was the guy's obituary from six years ago. He died of diabetes at the age of 40. And I have to admit that just for a second, I was happy. I thought to myself, "Heh-heh, that's what happens when you mess with Eli Garfinkel."**

**But then I caught myself and gave myself a tongue lashing for being so cruel. The guy was not nice to me, but he did nothing deserving of death, let alone a painful and premature death from severe diabetes. I pretty much forgot about him decades ago, but that wasn't enough. I should have forgiven him decades ago, too.**

**I was being vindictive, and that is always wrong. That is why the Torah says in next week's Torah portion, "*The Lord* will vindicate His people and take revenge for His servants."**

**Just as is the case with verbal cruelty, a lot of the vindictive cruelty in our world stems from a simple confusion. Far too many people confuse justice and vengeance. It's an understandable confusion, and sometimes the line really is paper thin.**

**For instance, after the Holocaust, there were fifty survivors who were given the job of baking bread for the American prisoner of war camp. The inmates of course, were all Nazis. So these fifty bakers, who called themselves The Avengers, baked a special recipe of arsenic bread. Unfortunately, they didn't put enough rat poison in the dough, so their intended victims got sick but didn't die.**

**That's a case where justice and vengeance are almost identical. To this day, the bakers are not apologetic, and I'm not sure they should be. How can I judge them after what they went through?**

**Having said that, it is usually much easier to tell the difference between vengeance and justice. Acting with justice means caring for the future. Acting with vengeance means trying to rewrite the past. The former is generally good, the latter is usually bad.**

**An example is the Sunni Shia conflict in Islam. When Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims kill each other because of what happened at the battle of Karbala in the year 680, fifteen centuries years ago, they are not acting with justice in mind but rather with vindictive cruelty.**

**And here in America, when we execute a criminal twenty or thirty years after the fact, we're not acting with justice. We're simply being vengeful, and I hope a future Supreme Court will stop the vindictive, cruel disgrace that the death penalty is.**

**What is the solution for vindictive cruelty? The only thing that can defeat it is a sense of humility. Vindictiveness comes from a sense of arrogance and moral superiority. Only when we are willing to say, "We're not so great ourselves" can we back away from the ledge and admit that we have no right to be cruelly vengeful, not in thought and certainly not in action.**

**Now that we've seen verbal and vindictive cruelty, we're ready for today's final exhibit, which is apathetic cruelty. Apathetic cruelty may be the worst form of all.**

**Normally, we think of cruelty as an action, something that one person does to another. But it can be just as bad if not worse to not care about another person's suffering. In fact, that's another one of the dictionary definitions of cruelty: "Callous indifference to pain and suffering."**

**I want you to think for a moment about the most un-Jewish thing you can say. Maybe you think the most un-Jewish thing to say is "I'll have the corned beef on white with mayo." Or maybe you think it's, "That's okay, honey, just because you're our son doesn't mean you have to call us."**

**But in fact the most un-Jewish words are "It's not my problem" or "I don't care" or any other expression of apathy in regard to another human being's suffering.**

**Our entire way of life is based on caring for the plight of the poor, the widow, the stranger, the orphan, and the sick.**

**I would also add the convict. Our criminal justice system is indeed criminal and cruel. We have an overloaded system that forces those who can't afford pricey defense attorneys to plead guilty in order to avoid lengthy sentences, often for non-violent crimes. We tend not to care because, after all, they're just convicts.**

**And when our cruel system finally releases these people into society, we prevent even non-violent convicts from getting jobs by marking them as felons, thus making them pariahs in society who often return to prison. And we don't care because, again, business is business and they're just convicts.**

**Just as with vindictive cruelty, apathetic cruelty has an international dimension. Did you know that right now Syrian forces are dropping chlorine gas on entire civilian populations in the hopes of killing some terrorists?**

**And did you know that America absolutely has the power to destroy the chlorine facilities but refuses to do so for reasons that are frankly unclear?**

**I'm not sure why we don't seem to care about Syria's chemical weapons. There is no question that Syria is using them, there is no question that they are making more, they even admit doing so, but our apathy is stronger than our revulsion. It's just easier for us to say, "It's not our problem." It's easier for us to say, "America shouldn't be the world's policeman."**

**This should bother us as Jews, because the same thing happened in the Holocaust. American bombers attacked many of the areas around Auschwitz and other death camps, but they never bombed the crematoria or the train tracks themselves.**

**And everyone in Germany and Eastern Europe knew full well what was happening, and some could even smell what was happening. They didn't need social media to know that millions were dying on their watch. But it was just easier to say nothing.**

**Now we turn to the solution. What can we do as individuals about the cruelty that stalks our world? Well, of course you can vote in the way that you think will best hold cruelty at bay. But the best way to stop cruelty in the world is to stop it in your own heart.**

**We learn this lesson from Simcha Bunim, one of the great Hasidic masters. He said, "When I was young, I thought I could change the world. As I got older, I saw that I could not change the world, but at least I could change my city."**

**"As time went on I saw that even that was beyond my grasp, but I said, "I'll at least change my neighborhood." When I saw that was not working, I said, "I'll at least try to change my family." When I saw that that failed, he said, "I'll have to try to only change myself."**

**Simcha Bunim concluded by saying, "But once I succeeded in changing myself, I saw that my family was different, my neighborhood was different, my city was different, and in a sense the entire world was different."**

**We can't stop the Sunnis and Shias from fighting. We can't change our criminal justice system, not quickly anyway. Nor do we have any real say about where the United States drops bombs. So the only way for us to lessen the cruelty in this world is to lessen it within ourselves.**

**May the loud blast of the Shofar awaken within us the small still voice, the voice of God that tells us to stop cruelty in all its forms. Every day, every minute, in every case. Shanah tovah.**