

G'mar Hatimah Tovah. May we all be sealed for a new year of health and goodness."

A Jewish woman named Bertha was just about to make herself a cup of coffee when her front doorbell rang. She looked through the window and saw that it was a Jehovah's Witness missionary.

She thinks to herself, "I'm usually pretty rude to these people. Maybe that makes the Jewish people look bad. I'll try being decent and kind instead. So she opens the door and smiles warmly.

"Good morning, ma'am," the man says, "I'm a Jehovah Witness and ..." but before he could continue, Bertha said to him, "I'm just about to make myself some coffee. Why don't you come in and join me?"

Very surprised, he agreed. After coffee, Bertha said, "I'm now going to have to make some lunch for myself so I don't really have much time at this moment to talk to you. But if you'd like to join me in a bite to eat, we can talk about your faith afterwards."

The missionary was shocked by Bertha's kindness and decency, especially since she slammed the door in his face the last time. But again he agreed and sat down for lunch.

When they had finished a generous and tasty lunch of cold cuts and soup, Bertha said, "OK, I'm all ears. Why don't you start at the beginning and tell me all about the Jehovah Witness movement and your beliefs?"

He was totally floored by the warm and decent treatment he's received from this Jewish lady and replied, "I can't tell you anything - I've never gotten this far before!"

Like many rabbis, I've spoken about morality from the pulpit hundreds of times in different permutations. But I think that given what is going on in our country, common decency is actually a more important topic than morality right now, and I will explain the difference shortly.

First, I'm going to tell you what common decency is and why we should care about it. Then I'll explain why we should talk about decency on Yom Kippur. Third, I'll talk about how this lack of basic decency has affected our society, and, finally, what we can do to reverse the problem.

What is decency? You might think that decency and morality are synonyms, but there is an important difference between them. Morality primarily concerns our private behavior, what people don't see. Decency, in contrast, is mainly an issue of external conduct, the behavior we display for the world to see.

In other words, morality is first and foremost something that God demands of us. Decency, in contrast, is the behavior that we demand of each other, no matter what our personal religious beliefs may be.

I didn't make this idea up, of course. It's in the Torah in Parashat Nitzavim, which we read very recently. There, we read that "Hidden things are for the Lord our God, but public matters are for us and our children forever."

That verse means that I or other people can encourage you to be moral, but your morality is ultimately between you and God. Decency, however, is something that is required of all of us, and it is our responsibility to enforce it.

Now that we know what decency is, we can ask why we should care about decency. The answer is that we should care about decency because it is one society's load-bearing columns.

A load-bearing column, for those of you who don't know, is a column that supports the weight of a building. If you remove or damage a load-bearing column, your structure could collapse.

Decency, the outward respectability we maintain, stabilizes our nation. Along with other weight-bearing columns such as family, the economy, and public safety, decency makes life as we know it possible. Anything that harms one of our load-bearing columns must be condemned in no uncertain terms.

If people were not basically decent with each other, we wouldn't be able to form the relationships that make life meaningful, and life is all about the relationships we make. A lack of decency prevents those bonds and connections from forming because it drives people apart and makes them turn away from each other in disgust.

Without decency, society unravels. Without decency, in the immortal words of Bill Murray in the original Ghostbusters movie, we would have "Mass hysteria, dogs and cats living together."

When a community becomes indecent, it starts to rot from the inside. The most recent example I can think of is the territory controlled by ISIS, where the fundamentals of basic decency have completely dissolved. We're seeing the same phenomenon in some urban areas that are completely ruled by gangs.

You can think of decency as a kind of filter for society. Legally speaking, we have a right to say pretty much whatever we want, and I support that right. But when needlessly lewd and crude behavior becomes extremely common, that load bearing column of common decency starts to shake.

What causes decency to decline in the first place? That's an easy question. Decency weakens when the standards of public morality are relaxed too much.

My dictionary says that decency is “**behavior that conforms to accepted standards of morality or respectability.**” So when those standards are weakened or even eliminated, the result is indecency.

One reason that our standards are going down the toilet is the lack of education about moral truths. According to a New York Times editorial by philosophy professor Justin McBrayer, the national Common Core curriculum teaches students that all value statements are mere opinions.

The result, Professor McBrayer says, is that our college students are unable to say with certainty that murder for fun is morally wrong. They hem and haw and say, “Well, I personally think murder for fun is a bad thing, but I can’t say that it is wrong for all people in all cases.”

This is what obsessing about diversity has done to us. It’s a terrible trend, and it bodes very poorly for the future of American decency. If we can’t agree on basic moral truths that we all have in common, then there is no standard for decency to rest on. Decency cannot exist without a consensus about simple moral questions.

Of course, it’s not fair to dump all the blame on the Common Core curriculum, which itself only reflects the wider society. Maybe a more important source of the problem is that most Americans of all ages know very little about the Bible, the Western world’s primary source of moral standards.

How many high school seniors and college freshmen can name the Ten Commandments? How many can name them in order? How many of them can find the words “Love your neighbor as yourself” in the Bible and speak intelligently about it?

I'm afraid the answer is "Not very many." If we don't even know what the moral standards are, there can't be any decency because we won't know how to define it.

So now we know what decency is. It's the dignified, public behavior that we have to display for others even if we ourselves are not always so great on the inside. We also know why we should care about it. We need to care about decency because it is one of the things that makes civilized life possible.

But why should we think about decency on Yom Kippur? I happen to think that anytime is a good time to think about decency, but Yom Kippur is a particularly auspicious time to do so. The reason I think so is that Yom Kippur started as a ritual for communal atonement.

The Torah reading for Yom Kippur focuses on the ceremony the High Priest performed in order to cleanse the nation of their sins, which were loaded on the goat and sent into the wilderness.

We need to think about decency on Yom Kippur because indecency is not the doing of any one individual. A single person's indecent behavior, even when it is particularly shocking and disgusting, is generally a symptom of indecency in the culture at large.

Yom Kippur is all about our communal sins. Even when we talk about our personal sins, we speak about them in the first person plural and atone for them as a community. That's why we say *ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu*, we are guilty, we have betrayed, we have stolen, and that's why we say *Al hayt SheHatanu*, for the sin we have committed.

Indecency is a communal sin. To borrow a phrase from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, some are guilty but all are responsible. Don't get me wrong, we should

be deeply concerned about any individual's indecent behavior, especially if the person in question wants power or an important job.

At the same time, we must also worry about the communal lack of decency that generates and fuels the individual kind, allowing it to spread and thrive like a spiritual tumor. Yom Kippur is a time for to atone for the indecency in our society, and there is a lot of it.

How has this lack of decency affected our nation? There are several kinds of indecency, and they are all chipping away like termites at that load bearing column I was talking about.

First, we have the obvious kind and the kind that we're all talking about now, which is sexual indecency. This form of indecency is wrong because it reduces men to animals and women to objects.

Our young men are learning some very toxic lessons about women. That is why we had the case of Brock Turner, the Stanford rapist who, to my shock and dismay, only served three months in jail. What I found so deeply sickening about this case is that the crime was committed in public.

Brock Turner was apprehended by some bicyclists who rode by and saw him assaulting his victim in broad daylight. There was no question about what he did. Who or what taught Brock that it was okay to treat a woman in this manner? And as a result of his unbelievably lenient sentence, how many other young men learned a toxic lesson of their own?

When powerful people commit acts of sexual indecency, they must be punished, if for no other reason then at least as an example for the rest of us. Here in America, we tend to think that powerful people can do whatever they want, and unfortunately, that is often quite true.

But it's not true in Israel. Israel takes sexual indecency very seriously. Their former President, Moshe Katzav, was convicted of rape and he was sentenced to prison just as anyone else would have.

When Israel Defense Force Colonel Ataf Zahar raped a subordinate, he also was sent to prison. Moreover, he was forced to pay his victim ten thousand dollars and his rank was reduced all the way to private. In Israel, perhaps because it is a place where Jewish values matter at least in theory, power does not allow you to do whatever you want.

Sexual indecency should not be ignored because it turns the fundamental relationship of love into a power-based dynamic of predator and prey, and that's not what love is supposed to be.

There's a story from the Talmud that shows what the Jewish tradition thinks of sexual indecency. There was once a man who became very attracted to a certain woman. She refused to marry him, but his attraction did not go away. In fact, his desire for this woman only deepened and he became mentally ill to the point that he was in physical danger.

He went to the doctor, and the doctor said that the only thing that would cure him would be for the woman to submit to him. The Sages banned the doctor's prescription and said, "We would rather that this man die than that the woman submit to him."

So the doctor changed his prescription. This time, he said that the man would be cured if he were allowed to look at the woman's body. Again, the Sages forbade the doctor's advice and said, "It is better that this man die than he be allowed to gaze at the woman's naked body."

Finally, the doctor changed his orders again and said that the man would be cured if he would just be allowed to talk to the woman through a screen. Even so, the Sages said, “We would rather that this man die than he talk to her through a screen.”

The moral of the story is that sexual indecency is a terrible thing that cannot be tolerated, even if it would save a life. This woman wanted nothing to do with this man, so that should have been the end of the story. The Talmud doesn't tell us whether or not the man ended up dying. But it does appear that he learned to respect women as a Jewish obligation.

Another form of indecency eating away at us is profanity. There is so much profanity in our society that I am almost numb to it, and I think many of you agree with me.

The issue as I see it is not the bad words we say when we stub a toe. I'm not saying that when you hurt yourself that you have to say aw jimmy gee willikers. And I don't care about humorous profanity in the movies and TV – let's face it, that kind of humor is funny. Immature and low class, but often very funny.

No, my concern is the frequent, over-the-top profanity, the kind of machine-gun potty mouth that is just indiscriminately sprayed everywhere these days.

The problem with such profanity is that it desecrates the human capacity for communication, a divine gift that ought to be treated with the utmost of respect. Our power of speech can be used for both beauty and ugliness, which is why the Bible says in Proverbs that “life and death are in the hands of the tongue.”

Of course, you don't have to use your mouth to be profane. The NFL just increased the penalties for unsportsmanlike behavior. It seems many of the players were using their backsides to make deeply offensive gestures to taunt the

opposing side. You might say their backsides were offsides. Just ask Giants wide receiver Odell Beckham, who was just fined \$24,000 for obscene behavior during the recent loss against the Vikings.

The Talmud condemns profanity in no uncertain terms. In Tractate Shabbat, page 33a, Rabbi Hanan the son of Rava taught the following: “Everyone knows what happens after a wedding, but anybody who defiles his mouth by talking about it is cursed for seventy years even if he has just been sealed into the Book of Life.”

There again we see the connection between indecency and Yom Kippur. Profanity can ruin all the good we do for ourselves in these ten days. If you pray your heart out and beg forgiveness here, make sure you don’t flush it away when you leave the building by defiling your mouth with disgusting language.

What can we do to protect the decency of our society? The first step is to take the problem seriously. Back in 1959, a man named G. Clifford Prout appeared on the Today Show and announced the creation of a new organization called SINA, the Society for Indecency of Naked Animals.

Mr. Prout claimed that animals needed pants to cover their behinds just like humans, and that it was indecent to allow animals to walk around naked. It was a much more innocent time back then, and everybody believed what Mr. Prout was saying. He had membership cards and all the paraphernalia of real organization.

It turned out to be a giant hoax perpetrated by Alan Abel. He played an awesome joke on America and we fell for it hook line and sinker. But indecency is not a joke anymore, and we need to take the problem seriously, just as seriously as we take other societal problems.

The other thing we can do is protest against indecency in whatever way we can. Vote in the way you think will protect decency in America. Vote however you want, but please keep the issue of decency in your mind when you do so.

When we hear indecency, especially from the mouths of children, we have to stand up and say it's wrong, even if doing so makes us look like old fuddie-duddies. The best parents are the ones who are not cool.

But the most important thing you can do is to embed the value of decency into your life. Live a decent life, be an example of a decent life, and you won't have to protest very loudly at all. Your life will become a powerful statement against the obscene acid that endangers our country.

May we all earn our seal in the Book of Life by standing up for decency and fighting indecency whenever and wherever we can. G'mar Hatimah Tovah. It's now my pleasure to invite our President, Marc Hilton to deliver a message to the congregation.