



“AIMING FOR MENSCHLIKEIT”

Recently, I stumbled on a phrase in a poem. It struck me as sad, hopeful and realistic all at the same time. The phrase brought to mind the moments of friction in our world and the moments of gentleness. The poet draws our attention to the pain and loneliness of life, while valuing the islands of compassion and connection.

...so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness...
(from “Kindness” by Naomi Shihab Nye)

Finding these words in the two-year old prayerbook we use for Elul, the month prior to Rosh Hashanah, was made even more powerful after I explored Naomi Shihab Nye’s biography. Naomi Shihab Nye was born in 1952 in St. Louis, and has a Palestinian father and an American mother. During high school, she lived in Ramallah, in Jerusalem’s Old City, and in San Antonio, Texas. The actual poem “Kindness,” speaks more specifically about travelling in South America than it does of the Middle East. The desolate landscape she describes could apply to so many parts of the world and so many moments in our personal lives. Our journeys so often seem to come with only isolated moments of kindness.

A story of such a journey:

Once, a king sent a messenger on a long journey to another king. The messenger arrived late and was quickly brought to the throne room. Exhausted from his long ride, he relayed his message, amidst heavy, tired breathing:

“My king’s message is that you send him... a blue horse.... with a white tail.... and if you don’t...”

The king stopped him immediately, saying to the exhausted messenger: “I’ll listen to no more of your rude words. Tell your king that I have no horse that answers to that description, and if I had...”

Here, the second king paused, and the messenger, shocked at the words coming from one who had been previously been friendly to his king, ran out of the palace. He jumped on his horse and galloped back to his king to report the shocking anger of the second king. When the first king heard the report, he flew into a great rage and declared war on the neighboring kingdom. The war lasted many months. A great deal of blood was shed, a vast stretch of land was laid to waste, and large amounts of money were spent during the intense war.

Finally, with their armies and money exhausted, both kings agreed to an armistice for the purpose of settling their quarrel. Sitting at the conference table, the second king asked:

“What did you have in mind when you sent a message saying that you wanted a blue horse with a black tail or else?”

The first king replied:

“Simple, I requested that you send me a blue horse with a black tail or else.... if you don’t have one like that, you could send me a horse of any color... What did you mean when you said that you had no horse and if you did have....”

The second king quickly answered:

“Simple, if I did have such a horse, I would have sent it to your country as a gift.”

“Oh no” said one king. “We have been fools to go to war against one another. It was just a misunderstanding.”

The other king replied: “Let us declare peace immediately and become friends again.”

And they did. Each was ashamed, but had their great error written in the history books. They hoped their misunderstanding of each other’s words would help others avoid such errors in the future. (101 Jewish Stories, collected by Simon Certner, Board of Jewish Education of New York City, 1983)

Silly, sure. However, wars have been fought over stranger things than misunderstandings of horse colors or the intentions of rulers. Arguments have occurred between nations or within families over far less. So often, we find ourselves in the desolate landscape between regions of kindness. At any given point in our lives, a war has been underway. Sometimes a country is in the right during a war, sometimes maybe more than one side may be, however, the destruction of war remains. A 2003 New York Times article asserted that: “Of the past 3,400 years, humans have been entirely at peace for 268 of them, or just 8 percent of recorded history.” (Chris Hedges, July 7, 2003) Sadly, I would assume our species has never existed for a year or a day exempt from strife amongst family, friends or neighbors. Our Yom Kippur prayers remind us how easily we hurt those we love, let alone others.

Janusz Korczak was the pen name of a much-admired Polish Jewish child-rearing expert, who heroically ran an orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto. Janusz Korczak was concerned about the teaching of kindness to children. He was equally concerned with the behavior of adults. The kindness Korczak desired wasn’t a simple sweetness or constant surrender. Janusz Korczak was interested in what Jews call *menschlichkeit*. Our prayerbook defines *menschlichkeit* as “human decency,” stating that a *mensch* is “person of fine character.” (p.263) I read a letter that described: “A *mensch* is a human being, not in the biological but in the humanitarian sense.”

(Letter to New York Times, Gene Cosloy Wayland, Mass., Feb. 20, 2006)

So, being a *mensch* isn’t about always being 100% agreeable, rather about acting properly and ethically towards others.

At the worst of life’s moments, Janusz Korczak expressed his basic goal. He wrote:

I exist not to be loved and admired, but to love and to act. It is not the duty of those around me to love me. Rather it is my duty to be concerned about the world, about humanity.
(Ghetto Diary, Shoken Books, 1978)

It is likely that our parents raised us to be menschs, whether they used the word or not. Judaism, as with most religions, encourages us to care about others in our everyday behavior and consider them in our interactions. Naomi Shihab Nye, my opening poet, places high value on acting kindly, for in that way you would be able to help others and receive help along life's path. Within her words, we can find encouragement towards being a mensch. Be it amongst family or friends, government or work, we are left only to navigate with kindness, with menschlikeit, if you will. She writes:

...It is...
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you
everywhere
like a shadow or a friend."

I don't think this Palestinian-American necessarily knew the term menschlikeit. Kindness works pretty well as a stand-in term. However, our ancient prophets didn't know this Yiddish term either. It didn't stop them from writing of the goal of behaving like a mensch. They prophesied that such behavior would lead to the blessings of companionship the poet hopes for.

As the prophet Hosea taught:

Let us run towards God and act in a godly way.
Then God will appear as sure as daybreak,
God will come to us like rain.
(Hosea 6:3)

The prophet was not solely thinking of Yom Kippur fasts or other rituals. Hosea and our other Biblical prophets were concerned with ethical behavior. While it may take study and experience to confront life's biggest ethical dilemmas, simply being kind on a deep level, by being a mensch, we can address most human friction.

The poet's kindness, the kings' reconciliation, Janusz Korsczak's menschlikeit and Hosea's promised rain can all be brought to life by each of us. We should keep them in mind on every level of life. Our interactions today and each day can help humanity and fellow humans navigate the desolate landscape between regions of kindness.

Back on page 263, our prayerbook offers a sampling of menschlikeit. Framing these acts are the following hopes:

May the One who showered blessings on our ancestors
rain blessings on those among us whose everyday
deeds are without measure....
On this Day of Atonement,
may they be inscribed for their worthy deeds;
may they be sealed for their acts of goodness and
kindness.
And let us say: Amen.