

**Impressions From the Bar
(Erev Yom Kippur 2023/5784)
By Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch**

An encounter with a very non-New York couple leaves a lasting impression on Rabbi Ammi Hirsch. “They reminded me of the basic truth of our tradition: that a wise person learns from everyone,” he says. “Morality, the very soul of religion, is a feeling, the result of friendship and companionship.” As we begin 5784, Rabbi Hirsch says: “May you be tolerant of all people, assuming the best in them, judging them favorably, and giving them the benefit of the doubt...”

From time to time, especially during the summer, my wife and I grab a quick dinner at one of our local neighborhood restaurants. When we don't have patience for the whole waiter and menu thing, we just take a couple of seats at the bar rather than the main dining area. We can get in and out in less than an hour. If we come early, there are few people at the counter. Often, it's just the two of us and the bartender. We like it that way — a temporary asylum of privacy and tranquility within a turbulent urban madhouse. Don't get me wrong; I like people, too, but sometimes, not talking to people on a warm summer evening is also nice.

There is a certain New York etiquette at the bar. Locals know that you are sitting there because you kind of want to be left alone. It's one of the attractions of the bar area. And New York bartenders always seem to know precisely when to say something to you, and when to just leave you be.

So one evening this summer, Alison and I walk into a neighborhood restaurant and sit down at the bar of one of our local hangouts. There were several people already there, so we grabbed the two corner seats. I noticed that the couple next to us — call them Ted and Mary — from the moment we sat down looked at us in a non-New York kind of way. It was much too friendly, way too empathetic, overly curious, and excessively deferential for any self-respecting New Yorker.

Now if you are in the public eye long enough, you get some of this as a matter of course. A lot of people know you. They can't always place how they recognize you — I can see their minds churning, trying to figure it out — but there is always some faint recognition on their face — in their eyes, actually — and I, at least, often detect it. When I was younger, I would be confused with that actor on “Crossing Delancey Street” — you know, the pickle guy, Peter Riegert. From time to time, people would ask me for autographs. I would sign, “To my friend from Peter Riegert,” and they would be in seventh heaven. Nah, just kidding.

I came to develop a sixth sense for the once-over. I would tell Alison, “Someone is looking at me here.” And my wife would laugh and laugh, teasing me that I was projecting Beyonce onto my D-level celebrity status. She stopped laughing at me — at least about this kind of thing — when we were at a restaurant several years ago with a couple of friends, in Cold Spring, of all places, and I said, “I sense someone looking at me.” Of course, they all laughed and laughed at my swollen head, until five minutes later a woman approached me and asked, “You're Rabbi Hirsch, right? You did my bat mitzvah 20 years ago.” Our friends' stunned expression is pleasantly and permanently implanted in my mind.

But these people — call them Ted and Mary — they seemed different. They didn't look like congregants or past congregants or Jewish media consumers. In fact, they didn't seem Jewish to me at all. I have a sixth sense for that, too!

Finally — call her Mary — who was sitting right next to me, gathers the nerve to initiate a conversation. Now you know how authentic New Yorkers instinctively pick up verbal and non-verbal cues of “leave me alone?” That wasn't Mary — another hint that she wasn't from our neck of the woods. Anyway, we started chit-chatting. What could we do? We felt we were representing New York. We didn't want this couple to return home bad-mouthing all of us. It turns out that they were from Idaho and were in New York for the month accompanying their daughter, who is a dancer and was invited to participate in a prestigious summer course.

Idaho! They sought advice about New York, where to go, what to see — all standard stuff. I asked about life in Idaho since, alas, I don't anticipate ever going. They told us about the great American outdoors: they described hunting and fishing, pristine rivers and crisp, clean fresh air — all quite intimidating to me. They mentioned that practically everyone they know in Idaho is devoutly religious, they pray daily and attend church weekly. And, they added, “We are Trump supporters; everyone is where we come from.” Mary asked Alison what she did, and the response, “New York attorney,” didn't seem to raise any suspicious connection in their minds.

Predictably, Mary then asked me what I do. I hesitated for an instant because I was there for a quick beer and burger. For one brief moment, I thought to respond that I, too, am an attorney — which is true! But I said, “I am a rabbi. You know what that is, right?” I'm not sure that Ted and Mary really knew what that was, but I followed up with: “Have you ever met Jewish people?”

They kind of did, but not really. Mary made the motion for the side-curls that she had seen on television, or perhaps on the streets since she arrived — and I explained to her that most Jews are not that way. Ted mentioned that he had gone to school once with someone Jewish way back when. But I assumed that this couple had never had the kind of conversation with any Jew that they were obviously about to have with me.

I explained that a rabbi is like their evangelical minister — only Jewish. I can't tell you the effect that had on Mary. She looked at me as if I was priestly royalty. For a split second, I thought to myself, “How wonderful and ego-affirming it would be to shepherd a flock of true believers like them!” But I came to my senses when Mary looked at my half-emptied beer glass and asked with trepidation, “Are you allowed to drink beer?” I immediately thought of the biblical Nazirites who voluntarily took upon themselves the obligation to avoid alcohol consumption, among other restrictions. The rabbis didn't appreciate the Nazirites, which is why we no longer have Nazirites today. The Sages thought they were too pious, too extreme, and too self-indulgent with all their religious prohibitions. The Talmud stated that life is hard enough as it is; why burden yourself with additional obligations that are not required?

Increasingly, I was taken with Mary. How not — for someone who gives you that kind of deference, respect, admiration, even reverence — not for anything you've done, but just because of what you represent? It's a lot of pressure! Mary's sincerity and authenticity, her politeness, her generous countenance, really touched me. That's the thing about personal experiences and relationships. It's one thing to picture in your mind an evangelical, Trump-supporting, hunting and fishing couple from Idaho. It's an entirely different matter to have met these delightful, gracious, courteous, respectful, inquisitive, intelligent and engaging people,

who were spending a month in the big city, at considerable expense, to grant their teenage daughter her life's dreams.

We spoke for about 30 minutes. From Ted and Mary's perspective, I think they probably would have been happy to spend another hour there at the bar, but we really had to go. As we began to bid them farewell, Mary said to me, "Before you leave, could you say something to me?" I was a bit baffled by that because we had spoken for a long time and I had said many things to her, so the best I could come up with was, "I wish the two of you much enjoyment in New York City, and I hope that you remember this time here with us for good." I thought that they might return to Idaho and tell their friends that, contrary to what they may have heard, New Yorkers are normal and even friendly — and that you can run into Jews on every street corner and in every restaurant, and they're not so bad either.

But I could see Mary's disappointment written all over her face. It was almost like a spiritual let-down for her.

She explained, "No, I wanted you to bless me."

Far from having any mixed feeling about Jews, she equated me with her own spiritual leader, and wanted me to consecrate the time we shared together. She saw me as a fellow traveler in faith. I did bless her — not by what is called the "laying of hands" — but I paraphrased a number of my favorite teachings from Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Sages in the Talmud:

I said to her, "May you be tolerant of all people, assume the best in them, judge them favorably, giving them the benefit of the doubt. Everyone is in pain, everyone is struggling with something. Pursue peace."

And then, Ted and Mary — Mary especially — looked content, satisfied, even fulfilled.

I think I made an impression on our guests from Idaho; I think they will remember the time we spent together at the bar of a New York City burger joint. But they likely left a more lasting mark on me, than I on them.

First, they reminded me of the basic truth of our tradition: that a wise person learns from everyone. Through others, we come to know ourselves better. When we enter a relationship — a real face-to-face encounter — we develop insight, wisdom and compassion that a book, a newspaper or a computer screen obscure. Moral awareness develops most meaningfully, not in a philosophy or ethics class, but through person-to-person interactions: listening, observing, doing and being done to. A screen is better than nothing. But only by zooming into another's soul — looking into their eyes and removing the barriers and filters — can we begin to understand their struggles, their dreams and ambitions. We come to realize that we are not so different. Their hopes are our hopes. Their fears are ours. We learn to empathize more and judge less. "*Al tadin et chavercha ad she'tagiah li'mkomo*" — "do not judge another person until you have been in his place," Hillel taught. If we can skip over the parts of the newspaper we don't want to read, stop the video wherever we please, mute what we don't want to hear, let the algorithms determine who and what we see, we deprive ourselves of the tools we need for self-awareness and self-understanding.

Second, relationships teach us how to live in community. Ted and Mary — rural, lovers of the great American outdoors of what we, on the coasts, call fly-over country, evangelical, Trump-supporting — everything I am not — they reminded me to be careful about the political stereotypes we neatly and casually apply to others. Americans are so angry today, so siloed, so polarized, so self-absorbed in their intense pursuit of victimhood and grievance, that we often neglect the distinction between “I disagree with you,” and “you are so wrong as to pose a mortal threat to my way of life.” There is space between “I think you are mistaken,” and “you are a morally-repugnant moron.” It is within that space that democracy lives, and free societies thrive. Some people really are a threat to our way of life, and some, really are morally repugnant morons. But most Americans are not. We make caricatures out of people by shallowly assigning to them attributes we ignorantly assume to be those of their group — their race, sex, zip code, religion, education, political affiliation, occupation.

Franz Kafka wrote this aphorism: “A cage went in search of a bird.” Avoid the temptation to take the cage you already constructed, often designed by self-interested others, in search of those who fit neatly into the enclosure you fashioned for them. The benefit of a cage in search of a bird is simplification. I don’t need to understand all the complexities bothering you. I don’t need to look deeper. Everyone is the same size and fits the cage because it can’t be altered. I have already built it. It is one size fits all. I am not looking to discover the magnificent diversity of God’s creation and adjust my views to what is actually out there. I am looking to shape whatever I find into my preexisting presumptions. But simplification distorts reality. It turns the other — a unique individual - into a thing, a construct, molded and contorted by us to fit our already-established precepts. And then, we, ourselves, become encaged, imprisoned behind the narrow bars of our shrunken worldview. Reality is much more complex, and people are much more complicated.

Every human being is filled with both the best and the worst of qualities, whether diploma-ed or not, affluent or not, religious, secular, coastal, urban, rural, white collar, blue collar, liberal, conservative, and whatever skin color under the sun. We are all made of the same stuff, and we all struggle with the same drives: The need for health, safety, respect, dignity, fulfillment.

Everyone contends with mortality; how to make my brief life count for something. Everyone needs friendship, companionship, belonging, affirmation, to love and be loved.

Everyone needs to find some order amidst the randomness and chaos of existence. It is what religion is designed to do. But we have so distanced ourselves from God, the synagogue, Jewish tradition, daily practice and religious discipline that we have opened a yawning chasm of yearning that must be filled with something else, because like nature, human nature, too, abhors a vacuum.

Beware of filling that void with politics. As you know, I am very concerned with, and engaged in, the political process. I speak about it often, and our synagogue acts upon this conviction daily. Political competition is critical, and we must be active, because politics is the way we determine policies, and policies are a reflection of public morality. No religion worth its weight in salt is concerned about the vulnerable and downtrodden, but unconcerned with, and uninvolved in, the policies that made those people vulnerable and downtrodden in the first place. But politics cannot replace religion. Party cannot replace Torah. And presidents are not messiahs — whether to fill the void for those who no longer believe in messiahs, or to justify divine intervention for those who do.

Third, Ted and Mary's faith uplifted me. That is the effect of interacting with people whose faith beats strong within them. They give you hope. Whether you, yourself, believe in anything, when we are in the presence of the faithful, they help us affirm life. It is not that they are unaware of the pain and disappointments, the trials, tragedies, travails and turbulence that visit every person. It is that despite this knowledge, they insist that life has meaning and purpose. Do not be afraid of life. There is hope for the human creature. Faith is hope, not established fact. It is a belief, not objective truth.

Like everything in human affairs, religious faith can be taken to extremes, and then, it becomes idolatrous, as monstrous and dangerous as any secular or political extreme. But authentically faithful people look for the good in others. They seek peace and understanding. They believe in the moral life.

Morality is intuitive and emotional, not scientific and objective. It is a human construct that cannot be discovered in a lab.

"Va'ya'ar Elohim et kol asher assah, ve'hinei tov me'od" — "And God saw all that God created, and behold, it was very good."

Goodness is an emotion. Science doesn't ask, "Is this good; is this just; does this feel right?" The question for science is, "Is this correct or incorrect?" Morality, the very soul of religion, is a feeling, the result of friendship and companionship, a fellowship with other human beings. That then leads to all of the humanitarian values first developed by the religious thinkers of antiquity and expanded upon by modern philosophers. Even secular humanism is religious in spirit, because it is not provable; it requires a leap of faith in human worth by virtue of human specialness — what religious people call "in God's image."

"Va'yipach be'a'piv nishmat chayim, va'ye'hi ha'adam nefesh Chaya" — "And God breathed into it the breath of life, and the human became a living being."

And so, as we begin 5784, I take this opportunity to bless you with these words, paraphrasing the Ethics of our Sages:

May your fellowship with human beings lead you away from violence, exploitation, theft, cruelty, torture, injustice and war. May you lead a life of compassion, gentleness, kindness, truth, honor, empathy, dignity, loyalty, generosity, humility and mercy. Do the right thing without expectation of reward. The reward of a good deed, is a good deed. May you seek and cherish human freedom, justice and righteousness.

May you be tolerant of all people, assuming the best in them, judging them favorably, and giving them the benefit of the doubt. Everyone is in pain, everyone is struggling with something. And may you be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it, loving all human beings, and bringing them closer to Torah.