

TRY A LITTLE TENDERNESS

*Can we break the cycle of fear → anger → cruelty → fear?
Non-complementarity, aka GRACE, as a spiritual practice.*

Yom Kippur

My grandfather, PaSam, once called to tell me he was eager to see me because he had a special gift to give me before he died. “You know I’m not going to be here forever,” he said, 92 years old at the time. Wow, I thought. Between the two of us, David and I had 13 years of graduate school. PaSam is about to pay off our grad school debt! I could barely believe it. One plane ride later, I approached him, prepared to humbly accept the check. “You know I’m so proud of you kids. You work so hard and make us so happy. So grandma and I want to give you something *really* meaningful. More meaningful than money. Advice. Here’s my advice: the future is in (wait for it...) radio.”

Radio?

Our beloved PaSam died a few weeks later. That was in 2006.

My grad school debt and I have walked through the past decade trying to understand what exactly he meant by that.

In 2008, I got a call from a radio producer of a show I had never heard of asking if I’d do an interview about the meaning of the Jewish holidays. My first radio interview ever was with Krista Tippett on Speaking of Faith. NPR insisted on rebroadcasting that interview for the next many years as the High Holy Days approached, even though, as I said, it was my first radio interview ever so I sound like a middle-schooler on Red Bull. Incidentally, I have begged them to let me record a new session, now that I know what a big deal it is to be in conversation with Krista Tippett, (who’s guests have included the Dalai Lama, Thich Naht Hahn and Maya Angelou...) and now that I’ve learned to take occasional breaths between sentences. But every year when that interview re-plays, I start getting emails from Jews in Alaska. And Christians—lots of Christians—in Vermont and New Mexico and Iowa. And even from one wonderful pastor from Billings, Montana, who says he’s inspired by how stubborn I am (thank you very much—and I would appreciate you passing that note on to my family). He wrote that he wants me to know that “there will always be one Christian pastor who regularly prays for [me], roots for [me], and gives thanks to God for [me].” People write to tell me that they were just driving home from work or dropping off their kids and started to cry when they heard the interview because it made them realize how they hungered for meaning and connection and purpose in their lives.

I say this to you not so you’ll go listen to that interview. It’s not that great of an interview. (Krista is of course great—that goes without saying. I am, as I said, nervous and young and earnest.) But I share this today because that interview helped me realize that millions and millions of people around the world are searching for meaning. And connection. And purpose. And PaSam was right, the future has in some ways come through one of the great transmitters of the past—radio. Some of the most potent and powerful ideas today are communicated through podcast, heard while we’re out on a run or on long car rides as our kids sleep in the back of the car.

But believe it or not, this is not a sermon about radio. It's a sermon about the spread of important and powerful ideas, which reach into the consciousness of a population and hold the potential to transform the way we live. Today I want to speak about one particular idea that I recently heard on the radio—thank you PaSam—that I just can't shake.

It comes from an Invisibilia podcast called "Flip the Switch." The episode begins with a true story told by a group of friends sitting at an outdoor dinner party. It's a beautiful night, there is wine and cheese... all is good. Until a man approaches and pulls a gun on them, demanding money. The man gets increasingly agitated, pointing the gun in their faces and threatening to shoot. They are all very scared; they try to talk him down but nothing seems to work.

I'm going to freeze-frame here for a few moments, and ask you to hold the image of these terrified friends, sitting at dinner attempting negotiation with an armed robber.

What do we do when someone approaches us with the intent to harm us or someone we love? How do we react when another person's act of aggression collides with our warm summer night celebration with friends?

Psychologists say that we are likely to respond to aggressive behavior with aggression, and, likewise, to compassionate gestures with compassion. We typically engage in what's known as complementary behavior. (Not complimentary, as in 'you look nice in that dress,' but complementary, as in reciprocal, or corresponding.) We tend to mirror the behavior of others toward us. When someone is hostile toward us, we react defensively, matching punch for punch. We do this in the name of self-protection; it's a kind of survivalist instinct that is as old as human beings themselves.

We do this in our families. In our marriages and our friendships. You insult my judgment? I attack yours. You push me? I push back harder.

We do this in our politics. We yell a lot. At the TV screen. At each other. Our country is more polarized than ever. We're so right! Everyone who disagrees is either an idiot or a traitor. And while we're so focused on how right we are and how awful they are, we become our own worst selves, mirror images of the very people we detest.

And of course this is the dominant dynamic of the Israel/ Palestine discourse, where hurt begets hurt, violence begets violence. Everyone is in pain. Everyone is right. And our pain and our rightness have kept us for many, many years from seeing the suffering and grief in one another, let alone the dreams and love and humanity in one another.

In Jerusalem this summer, I sat with Dr. Tal Becker, a senior member of the Israeli peace negotiation team. From Becker's vantage point as a veteran negotiator, he argues that the prevailing narrative of the Middle East is a victim/ villain narrative. Here's how it plays out in Israel/ Palestine (you may not like this, but it's important to hear it):

In the dominant Israeli mindset, the Jews are the victims. Even after 2000 years of exile, Crusades and Inquisition, pogroms and gas chambers, our basic right to self-determination is in question. We are singled out for opprobrium among the world's most vicious actors, even as we work to build a thriving democracy amidst the daily threat of terror and war.

And at exactly the same time, right next door, the dominant Palestinian mindset is also a victim and villain story, but with the roles reversed. Now the victim is Palestinian, enduring a daily struggle against humiliation and degradation under a racialized system of oppression that denies Palestinians their land, their rights and their dignity.

The two people share only one thing: the certainty that they are being unjustifiably wronged by the other. Without any shared narrative, Becker points out, the likelihood of peace is nearly non-existent.

What we see here is a profound lack empathy, matched with a devastating lack of curiosity. How much, in the Jewish community, have we attempted to understand the Palestinian narrative? It's so much easier to paint their cause with a broad brush, dismissing their claims under the tired, "They've never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity." And how much work is done among pro-Palestine activists to understand why so many Jews—people who strive to see God's image in human beings and fight for justice on our streets—persist in holding a deep and inviolable connection to Israel? Any of these curiosities would break the victim/ villain construct, giving us a chance to work together toward a just and fair resolution. But instead, a chasm has grown between the two communities as each of us entrenches in our narratives, playing defense and denial while real people continue to suffer.

When we live and negotiate and make policy from a victim mindset, nothing good emerges. Discourse is defensive, not fruitful. We feel attacked, so we attack back. No one speaks, we all scream. And even though we're screaming with all our might, no one can hear us, because it's really hard to hear at the same time you're screaming. And even more, it's very hard to do the kind of rigorous self-reflection and self-criticism that could ultimately change the conversation when you're accused of being a villain.

A Jewish communal leader approached me after a talk I gave in Israel this summer about courageous moral leadership. "But what are we going to do, Sharon... what are we going to do about BDS on campus?" This woman has spent most of her life working to ensure a Jewish future and is now terrified that it's all in jeopardy, as college campuses grow increasingly hostile not only toward Israel's government and policies, but toward Jewish students themselves.

Students now report exclusion of Jewish leaders and organizations from campus events, even those that have nothing to do with Israel. They tell of a growing anti-Semitism within the justice community, something I, too, have encountered over the past couple of years. Many fear that there is no room for the Jews in the broad-based alliance for racial and economic justice that has emerged with the advent of intersectional thinking.

As I listened to this woman share her worry, I realized that I don't know exactly what will solve the problem, but I know exactly what won't: mobilizing counter-protests to shout back at the people shouting at us. We've frankly been trying that for years and it hasn't made anything better.

Instead, we only get drawn deeper into the cycle of aggression and animosity. Fear provokes anger. Rage prompts entrenchment. Alienation incites violence. Forces come in pairs, Newton taught us, equal and opposite action-reaction force pairs.

How can we break out of this cycle?

Now back to that summer evening dinner party and the man waving a gun in the face of all the guests. Having run out of options, one guest finally steps up and says, and this is a true story: “You know, we’re all here to celebrate tonight. Would you like to share a glass of wine with us?” In an instant, the man’s whole composure changes. One of the dinner guests later says, “It’s like someone flipped a switch.” The man tastes the wine; he thinks it’s pretty good. He eats some cheese, stays for a few more minutes, says thank you, and walks away.

Psychologists call this *non-complementary behavior*. Remember—complementarity mirrors aggression with aggression. But *non-complementarity* breaks the cycle by introducing a new dynamic: generosity of spirit. Making a choice to engage with compassion even when someone has been unkind. It’s not easy to muster compassion in response to cruelty, but non-complementary behavior means doing it anyway, because you can. And it just might do what our more instinctual reciprocal behavior fails to do: break the cycle. It’s giving a glass of wine to the man waving a gun in your face. Completely illogical and maybe lifesaving.

I don’t know about you, but in a world of contempt and disdain, of outrage and aggression, I’m taken by this idea. What psychologists call non-complementary behavior, religion calls *grace*, an idea that sounds vaguely Christian to Jews, but appears throughout our ancient texts.

In Hebrew the word is חַן, as in לְחַן וּלְחֶסֶד וּלְרַחֲמִים—grace and love and compassion, which we thank God for after every meal in *birkat hamazon*. We see it in the Priestly blessing, which parents traditionally say to our kids every Friday night: זָאֵר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיְחַנֶּךָ – May God’s light shine upon you and give you grace.

Grace is a certain kind of love: undeserved love. As in ‘there but for the grace of God go I.’ *Avinu Malkeinu* says this explicitly: אָבִינוּ מַלְכֵנוּ. חַנּוּנוּ וְעֲנֵנוּ כִּי אֵין בָּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים —be gracious to us, answer us, even though we have done nothing to merit it.

Why is our tradition insistent on acts of kindness toward those who don’t deserve it? That feels more than counter-intuitive; it seems almost self-destructive. I don’t want to be taken advantage of!

I can think of four good reasons why grace might be the answer:

First, we’re called to act with grace because we know that we, too, often don’t deserve it, but someone else’s act of grace—whether God or human—has saved us, so treating another with undeserved kindness is a cosmic repaying of the debt.

Or perhaps it’s because we know that hate, even well-deserved hate, hurts us as much as it hurts our enemy. In 1957, Martin Luther King, Jr., preached a sermon called *Loving Your Enemies*:

We usually think of what hate does for the individual hated... But it is even more tragic, it is even more ruinous and injurious to the individual who hates... You can’t see straight when you hate. You can’t walk straight when you hate. You can’t stand upright. Your vision is distorted... That’s what hate does... Hate destroys the very structure of the personality of the hater.

We’ve all experienced this kind of hate. We’re so hurt, so consumed, so right, that we can’t focus on our work, or our kids. We can’t sleep. We carry the hate in our throats. What would we give for a release valve? All the grace in the world might not work. But even if my kindness is rejected and you persist in

your cruelty, even if I cannot change you, I'll always know that grace kept your cruelty from changing me.

Third, maybe we're called to grace because that is precisely what gives us back our agency, our sense of self, once so much has been stripped away by someone else's cruelty. I think often of Viktor Frankl, who wrote about the inner-freedom that persisted even in the death camps, where he remembers seeing men who would fight against hunger and exhaustion to walk through the huts at night offering comfort and crumbs of bread to other prisoners. They had been deprived and denied everything, but they held on to what Frankl called "the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."¹ So we act with grace because we can. Because the gift and privilege and burden of being alive is that we get to write this one part of our own stories.

Or finally, maybe we turn to grace because when all else has failed, it just might work. As in when being held up at a dinner party.

Ever since hearing that podcast, I can't shake the idea of non-complementary behavior. Of grace. Maybe *this* is what's missing from our social and political discourse. I wonder if this is the idea that could change everything.

I wonder what the practice of grace, would do to one particularly challenging relationship I am in. Could grace give us both a way out? And even if it doesn't end up with a box of chocolate and an apology note, would I not feel better knowing that I had mustered kindness, even in the face of so much venom?

And what about you...? I know some of you very well. You are struggling with an intransigent ex, an obstinate partner, a difficult kid. Or boss or co-worker. I wonder what would happen to those relationships if you were to shock them with a gentle word or gesture when they're expecting harshness; with generosity, when they've only been uncharitable.

Grace might give us an out, let us flip the switch. The challenge is mustering the strength to do something so counter instinctual as repaying hostility with kindness. One way to get there: to train the heart to look beneath a person's behavior—aggressive and unkind as it is—and strive to see a hint of his humanity.

George Orwell was enlisted as a soldier in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. His commander positioned him on a certain strategic perch and ordered him to shoot any enemy troops that came within sight. He crouched and waited until he finally saw an enemy soldier jump out of the trenches and run, in full view. Orwell was about to shoot when he noticed that the man was holding up his pants with both hands as he ran. Suddenly, he couldn't shoot. He later explained: "I had come here to shoot at 'Fascists,' but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist,' he is visibly a fellow-creature, [not at all unlike me], and you don't feel like shooting at [a fellow-creature]."

It took something so small as a broken belt to awaken Orwell to the humanity of his enemy. Once we see that the other is in some way like us—holding fear or trousers—well, that changes everything. And while that may make us poor soldiers, it also makes us strong humans.

¹ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 75.

What would it take for us to see humanity in the enemy, to see her malice and aggression as a reflection of a deeper anguish, and relate to her with grace on the basis of her fragile and flawed humanness?

Remember the story of the convert who wanted to be taught the whole Torah on one foot? First he went to Shammai, who was so insulted by the request that he beat him with a stick. The man then approached Hillel, known for his patience and humility. “Do not do to others what is hateful to you. The rest is commentary,” he said. “Now go and learn.” (Shabbat 31a)

Someone has been cruel to you. Do not respond with cruelty. Yes, you’re justified. Yes, you’re right. But this isn’t about being right, it’s about being decent.

Where did Hillel learn that from? The central obsession of the Torah is the treatment of the stranger; 36 times a community of former slaves is told that the stranger, *the other*, must be treated with fairness, dignity and even love. The treatment of the stranger offers newly freed slaves a spiritual mechanism to flip the switch, to create a counter-culture, a society built on values, not imprisoned by the gravitational pull of someone else’s bad behavior. Look, first and foremost, for the humanity in the other, precisely because nobody looked for it in you.

The Torah is commanding us to engage in radical, ongoing, universalized manifestations of grace—over thousands of years. Our people has been diminished and denied and humiliated and betrayed. We deserve to be angry and insular and self-protective and cruel. Wouldn’t we be justified, on some deep moral level, to never lift a finger for another human being, after all that has been done to us? You bet you have a right. But that is not who you are called to be. Again and again and again the Torah cries out to us: you were a slave in Egypt. Don’t you remember?

You know what it’s like to be the person no one will do business with, or sell a house to. The kid nobody will sit with on the bus. And all you want, once you have your own bus or business network, is to respond to an angry world with your own justifiable anger. But you must not. You were hated; now you are called to love. You were ignored; now you are commanded: *לא תוכל להתעלם*—don’t hide! Do not remain indifferent (Deut. 22:3). This does not only apply to family and friends, business associates. But even to enemies. Ramban says: “Remember the bond of humanity between you. Move beyond the hatred.”

No amount of money, no level of achievement or political or social comfort, no gated communities or Ivy League degrees or fancy titles at work will obviate this one core promise that our people made at Sinai 3000 years ago: *וְאַתֶּם יְדַעְתֶּם אֶת־נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם*: *You know the soul of the stranger; you were slaves in Egypt* (Ex 23:9). We must not treat another with the disdain, indifference or cruelty that we were treated. That is not only our origin story, it is our core commitment and driving ethos as a people.

Today, Yom Kippur, I am asking us to take hold of our fear and our pain and our victimhood and our rightness... and flip the switch. Instead of perpetuating the destructive cycle, engage in an act of grace. Not necessarily because the person opposing us deserves it—she probably does not. But because our world is aching and while answering hostility with hostility might feel right, we know that nothing will change or heal or grow if we don’t change the script.

You were a slave in Egypt. Now you are called to respond to the harshness of the world with a little tenderness. I’m talking about *grace as a spiritual practice*. Today, when we leave this place, what would

happen if we answered nastiness with kindness? What if we answered anger with calm? Hate with *hesed*?

Grace does not mean giving up who we are. It means living who we are despite—or in spite of—the way we are treated. Let me close by sharing with you two stories of grace in action:

I spoke with our dear Rabbi Oliver Joseph, former IKAR rabbinic intern, just before Rosh Hashanah. He lives in London now. How is it there, Oliver? I asked. I've been reading a lot lately about anti-Semitism in the Labour party, about the political turmoil with Brexit and the emergence of a new alt right, etc. "Well," he said, "it's not the easiest time to be a Jew in Britain." "How are you handling it?" I asked. He went on to explain that even as Jewish life has become increasingly challenging, the Jewish community raised 250,000 pounds over the summer to sponsor a kindertransport of Syrian refugee children. The kindertransports that saved so many thousands of Jewish children from Nazi Germany were privately funded, and the Jewish community felt it was now their responsibility to pay it forward. Forget the growing wave of anti-Semitism, the toxic politics. Our only choice, today, is to be exactly who we are, but better.

Second story: Over the summer, a woman named Saja Abu Fanni, a student in communications and political science at the University of Haifa, got on the bus at the end of a long day at university. Across the aisle was a Jewish woman and her small son. The little boy smiled at her, and she smiled back. He asked her if she was Arab, and she answered that yes, she was. He then asked her: "Do you have a knife?"

Saja was taken by surprise. She wasn't expecting to be seen as a suspect by a small child. The boy's mother was mortified, and began reprimanding her son. Saja replied: "No, I don't have a knife, but I have something else for you." The boy's eyes grew large. "What?" he asked. "A hug" she replied.

In her words:

I'll never forget that little boy who slid off his seat and gave me a big hug. I'll never forget his tiny hands at the back of my neck. I'll never forget how that little boy, who a moment earlier thought I might have a knife, left behind his Jewish mother and rushed toward an Arab passenger with the innocence of a child, burying himself in her arms.

I'll never forget the tears streaming from his mother's eyes as she said "I'm sorry," while her son's arms were clasped around my neck. "It's not your fault," I whispered back.²

That's the power of non-complementary behavior. That's grace. That's what all this praying and fasting and reflecting is here for. To remind us that while there's so much we can't control in our lives and the world, we can always choose grace.

So thank you, PaSam. I'm 40-something now and still paying off my grad school debt. But you were so right about radio.

² <http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.692232>