

Changing the world

Am I changing the world?

This summer I had the privilege of spending several hours with the Rev. Luis Cortés, who is the founder, president, and CEO of Esperanza, a widely-respected, Hispanic, faith-based Evangelical network that has changed thousands of lives in Philadelphia and beyond.¹ Unsurprisingly, Rev. Luis is an incredible person, dynamic, warm, humble, and engaging. We spent nearly three hours talking, not about how he did all of the amazing things he's done in his life, but about why he did them. And it all came down to one question that he kept asking himself in everything he did: Am I changing the world? What an amazing question. Am I changing the world? What would it mean, I thought, if we all asked ourselves that question, every day, but especially at these High Holidays, when we contemplate what we have done in the past year and set our intentions for what we hope to do in the year that has just started?

From the rabbinic point of view, of course, the world is always changing. The root of the Hebrew word for year, *shannah*, means change, and part of the point of this day is to recognize all that has changed in the past year and what is still changing for us. Some of the changes this past year has brought us may have been painful, as we may have encountered difficult setbacks in our work or personal lives; as we may have suffered through illness, our own or of those close to us; or, most painful of all, as we may have been parted from those we love by death. Those are the changes that can make this new year seem hard to bear, an immense weight that we carry, a moment we struggle to celebrate. And then there are those changes that have brought joy to our hearts. We may have found new and exciting paths for ourselves or watched as students, children, or grandchildren have embarked on new adventures and growth; we may have found new strength in our bodies and our minds through activity and learning, developing our capacities in ways we hadn't previously imagined; we may have found new time to enjoy the precious presence of the people who matter most to us. Change is what makes life fragile and what makes it meaningful; it is what makes our time in this world unique. It is not a surprise that when we imagine a next world, after death, it is one where nothing changes. We understandably lament some changes and celebrate others, and we can feel overwhelmed by the pace of change, but there is no question that change is in many ways synonymous with life.

Many of the kinds of changes I've just mentioned, though, are passive. They involve the world acting on us, affecting us, like a wind alternately buffeting us and lifting us up. That is certainly one way that we humans experience change, but it is not the only way. We all, no matter who we are, have some ability to effect change, not just to be affected by it. Although we often ascribe the ability to change the world only to a small subset of special people, people like Rev. Luis, or presidents and world leaders, one of the central arguments of rabbinic Judaism is that the world actually rests on what we each do. The rabbis see immense power resting in our hands, if only we choose to use it. What are we doing with that power? We know that the

¹ For more about Esperanza, see <https://www.esperanza.us/>

world is broken in large and small ways, a fact brought home by the environmental destruction, racism, antisemitism, and other forms of hate that we see around us. Are we addressing them? Are we changing the world?

Today I want to suggest some ways we might think about answering this question for ourselves, ways that take us through the process of introspection and interior accounting – *heshbon ha-nefesh* – that is a central feature of this holiday and that could set us up to transform our lives and how we think about them in this new year. As you’ll hear, this doesn’t necessarily mean that this is the year that you’re going to be marching through the streets, or becoming president, or starting a new organization like Rev. Luis, though it could mean any of those things. The point here is for us to claim our power and to learn to channel it in ways that really could change the world.

I: Changing the world by changing ourselves

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter taught: When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.²

It is a familiar Talmudic teaching that each person is a world unto themselves, unique and holy, made in the image of God.³ The proof brought from the Torah is that all of the people in the world have their source in a single person, the first person, *Adam Kadmon*, the original human being. The hidden teaching within this is that we are all Adam Kadmon, each of us a potential source of the future of humanity. The impact each of us can have on the world is immeasurable; to think about our lives prospectively, we are pure potential. Yet we often see changing ourselves as a solitary, individual, even selfish task, prone to the parody of self-improvement books and internet memes that promise, “Change your life in 30 days by doing this one simple thing!” The profound and challenging teaching of Jewish tradition is that the whole world has a stake in us as we try to change ourselves, because we have the capacity within us to create worlds.

If changing ourselves is so crucial to changing the world, how do we begin? Perhaps surprisingly, rabbinic tradition does not focus on addressing the big things, the large mistakes or missteps that may weigh on our minds at this time of year. While it is surely important to deal

² This teaching is ascribed to Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the 19th century founder of the Mussar movement that taught that ethical action was at the heart of Jewish practice. For more on the Mussar movement in our time, see *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar* by Alan Morinis (2008).

³ See for example [Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 37a](#).

with those when they happen, for most people the big things are aberrations, rare occurrences that do not really characterize our true selves. Instead, the rabbis suggest that we focus on the things that we do habitually and regularly, those patterns of behavior, thought, and feeling that have day-in, day-out impact, not only on us but also on others.

The Mussar movement that Rabbi Salanter founded focused on how we can address those habits and correct our course. It trains our attention on *midot*, qualities in ourselves that can be cultivated and practiced until they affect not only our conscious but also our unconscious behavior, how we react to situations even before we think them through. In Mussar, these *midot* are said to be divine qualities that are reflected in human beings precisely because humans are created in the image of the divine. The qualities we're talking about are ones we often think of as core to living a good life: humility, patience, gratitude, compassion, equanimity, simplicity, enthusiasm, silence, generosity, truth, moderation, loving kindness, responsibility, trust, faith, awe. Although Mussar practice has a long tradition and many subtleties to it, the core idea is simple. We choose one of these qualities that we feel to be not fully represented in ourselves and try to cultivate it. Although traditional Mussar practice recommends a teacher to guide us and a *hevruta* or partner to take this journey with us, it is possible to do this on our own.

The essential practice is to start by noticing when we exhibit this quality and, of course, when we fail to exhibit it, without trying to change anything, at least at first. Then we can start to think about what the circumstances or triggers are for us that make this quality come to the fore or recede, the things that help or hinder us. The next step is to try to infuse more of that quality – patience, gratitude, awe, or whatever we decide to work on – into the moments when we notice that we lack it. We might take a breath, count to ten, or say the name of the quality to remind us to open space for it. Over time, noticing our habits and starting, little by little, to interrupt and modify them, can really change something important about ourselves and how we act in and act on the world.

These are simple methods, but the thing is, they work. When you use them, to cultivate patience, or gratitude, or trust, or any other quality you need a little more of in your life, you'll start to notice the difference in yourself. Just don't try to do them all at once! One at a time is more than enough. Although others might not be able to put their finger on exactly what you're doing differently, they'll notice that they feel better around you, and they might even unconsciously start to follow your lead. And this is how changing ourselves, even in small ways, can begin to change the world.

II Changing the world by changing our relationships

Shammai used to say: ...receive all people graciously.⁴

⁴ Pirkei Avot 1:15.

Hillel said: That which is hateful to you, do not do to your friend; that is the Torah in its entirety. The rest is its interpretation; go and learn!⁵

The relationships between people, particularly between family members, friends, students, colleagues, and neighbors, the people we see every day, are a key focus of rabbinic teaching. The ancient rabbis recognize that these relationships largely create the social world that we inhabit, the web of experiences that makes up our lives. And yet too often we take these relationships for granted, allowing our comfort with these familiar people to close our eyes to how our words and actions affect them. If we think about it, we know how much other people affect our experience. Expressions of thoughtfulness, help when we need it, a kind word, a hug, can make all the difference in lifting our burdens and lightening our mood. And the opposite—thoughtlessness, failure to offer needed assistance, harsh words, and physical distancing—can make our burdens seem too much to bear, dragging us down and making each step of our day more difficult.

When we zoom out to look at our society as a whole, we can see how breakdowns in our interpersonal relationships affect much more than just the people involved. They can create a culture of uncaring, in which an overweening focus on the self crowds out concern for others as a general rule. American culture has been trending in this direction for decades, and, sadly, the experiences of the pandemic only accelerated and deepened that trend. The trauma of illness and death, the stress of lockdowns and job losses, and the cumulative impact of disappointments large and small could have led us to turn to each other more openly, to more deeply empathize with our neighbors and fellow citizens, and to form more supportive networks of mutual aid to take us through. While some of that did happen, on the whole we turned away from each other, narrowing the circle of our concern, and focusing on what we needed to the exclusion of those around us. Coming out of the pandemic, that trend has not abated; on the contrary, it continues to intensify, making itself felt in the large-scale deterioration in our mental health, in the epidemic of loneliness, and in the impoverishment of our civic discussions.

How do we reverse this trend? How do we change the dysfunctional society in which we find ourselves? The ancient rabbis offer us advice based on their conviction that it is our everyday interactions that create the society in which we live. Improving those encounters with each other is one way we can change the world. Today we'll just briefly look at two pieces of this advice, one from Shammai and one from Hillel, who were themselves study partners and colleagues. Shammai teaches us about how we should treat the people we encounter in the small interactions of everyday life, those chance meetings and conversations that recent research shows are key to our own well-being, fostering the "weak ties" that we need to bind us to others and promote general happiness.⁶ Shammai himself struggled to be kind in those encounters. We have multiple stories contrasting his harsh treatment of those who approach

⁵ Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a.

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/22/health/seniors-acquaintances-happiness.html>

him—including chasing them off with a stick—with Hillel’s willingness to entertain even the most ridiculous questioners with kindness and patience.⁷ Because of his behavior in these small interactions, Shammai gained a reputation as a harsh teacher, which changed how people saw him and limited the influence of his teaching. The Talmud tells the story:

Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel said: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The *halachah* is in accordance with our opinion, and these said: The *halachah* is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the *halachah* is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel. Since both these and those were the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the *halachah* established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing.⁸

With the hard-won knowledge born of experience, Shammai advises us to receive all people graciously; in other words, to foster those “weak ties” by being kind in our small, even trivial interactions with others. That attitude of kindness and graciousness can set the tone for an interaction or for an entire relationship; with most of these interactions, there is only a short time to communicate and only a few words exchanged, but what is communicated can make all the difference. On one recent Shabbat morning, I was hurrying down Ellet Street to GJC and said a quick, “How’re you doing?” to a man on the street. He replied, “I’m blessed.” That stopped me in my tracks. I thought about it for a minute and said, “So am I.” That little interaction actually changed my whole approach to my day. Taking Shammai’s advice, and making the effort to be kind and caring in small interactions, can create powerful moments of connection that actually do help knit our society back together.

Hillel teaches us about how we should treat those we have more substantive relationships with, our friends and neighbors, members of our community, people with whom we hope we have strong ties, interacting on a regular basis. He urges us to use how we would like to be treated as a reference point for how we treat others, and not to treat others in ways that we would find unpleasant or hateful. This seems simple, but it takes some reflection and some creativity to be able to see how the way we treat someone might feel to them. At core, Hillel is asking that before we act, we imagine the impact our own actions from the other person’s point of view, something that we are, frankly, not very practiced or good at, even with people we are close to. That is why Hillel does not stop there. He wants us to understand that the Torah provides a myriad of examples and methods for imagining how our actions might affect others; this is largely the subject of the *mitzvot* that deal with human relations. When we need help stretching our imaginations to see things from another’s point of view, we need to “go and study!” How do we understand the feelings of those living with poverty? The Torah has some ideas about that.⁹ What does it feel like to walk in the shoes of those who have lost

⁷ Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a.

⁸ Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 13b.

⁹ See Deuteronomy 15:7-11 and its commentaries.

family members to crime? Here too, the Torah gives us insight.¹⁰ If we really want to understand how to act in ways that are not hateful to others, to take on others' perspectives and think them through before we act, we need some help, and the Torah can be an invaluable guide. Maybe the entire point of the Torah is to displace our own perspective and see things differently, before we act and especially before we act in ways that affect others.

The rabbis give us so much advice about how to act with other people because they realize how crucial our relationships are to forming the social world in which we live and which affects the human future so deeply. Effecting change in those relationships is one of the most powerful means we have of changing the world.

III Changing the world by changing its structures

Anyone who is able to protest against [the transgressions of] their household and does not, is held responsible for [the transgressions of] the members of their household; if it is their townspeople, they are held responsible for [the transgressions of] their townspeople; if it is the entire world, they are held responsible for the transgressions of the entire world. Rav Papa said: The house of the Exilarch [the Jewish communal authority during Babylonian exile] was held responsible for the transgressions of the entire world, as Rav Hanina said, "What is the meaning of the verse, 'God will bring judgment on the elders and the officers of the people' [Isaiah 3:14]? Perhaps the officers have sinned, but have the elders sinned? Rather, this verse signifies that God brings judgment on the elders for not having protested against the transgressions of the officers."¹¹

Worldwide problems like the scorching of our planet, whose effects we have seen up close in this past year, have sadly reaffirmed the ancient wisdom that all of us are responsible for the large-scale issues that beset the world. The conventional thought of two hundred years ago was that our effect on the earth was negligible, that no amount of destruction of trees, animals, and land, no amount of waste poured into our rivers and smoke poured into the sky could stem the flow of bounty that God had placed on this earth. But now we see how deeply human action and the fate of the natural world are intertwined, how the communal choices we make here can lead to fire and flood elsewhere, and how, as we have seen this summer, smoke from those far away fires can darken our skies and enter our lungs, putting our own health at risk. And the same holds true for racism and other social ills—we no longer can ignore the effects of our actions on the world that we inhabit, whose fragility we finally, finally seem to be starting to comprehend. This Talmudic passage lays a heavy burden on us. Whenever we have the ability to raise our voices in protest, we are required to do so, whether that is at the level of the household, the town, or the entire world. We do not have the option of remaining silent.

¹⁰ See Deuteronomy 19:1-13 and its commentaries.

¹¹ Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 54a.

But if we are trying to change things at the large scale, things like reversing climate change, ending racism, and eliminating poverty, how should we go about it? Here, too, the rabbis have some advice, advice that runs counter to much of how public conversations about change in this country usually work. It's found in the continuation of the passage explaining why Beit Hillel's opinions were established as the *halachah* instead of Beit Shammai's. In addition to Beit Hillel's gracious reception of others, something else made Beit Hillel successful. In explaining how they reached the conclusion they favored, Beit Hillel would teach not only their own point of view but also the opposing perspective of Beit Shammai. Not only that, they would teach Beit Shammai's perspective first, before their own, to show respect for those who disagreed with them.¹² Teaching both their own positions and the positions of the opposition?! And even prioritizing the enemy's positions over their own?! What kind of argument is that?! It turns out that the way Beit Hillel disputed with Beit Shammai—over issues that they thought were just as important as we think our issues are, and with as strong a belief as we have that they were right—was the rabbinic model for a *mahloket l'shem shamayim*, an argument in which the parties are more concerned with learning than with being right, a dispute that is clarifying and life-giving, one that creates more light than heat.

Encouraging productive disagreements is one of the core values in GJC's Values Statement, how we envision acting with each other in this community. Of course, that vision is aspirational, something we don't always manage but that we achieve at our best. But the idea of having arguments in which we respect those who disagree with us, arguments in which we try to see the other side's point, is not just for disputes among ourselves. If we are serious about seeking lasting change, not just for this moment, this session of Congress, or this election cycle, but real, sustainable change, then we have to accept that the process will require us to acknowledge three things: 1) respect for difference is the only basis for moving things forward; 2) some of what our opponents think might be right, and some of what we think might be wrong; and 3) when this particular dispute is over, we are still going to be here, and our opponents are still going to be here—no one is going anywhere, and no one is going to magically disappear. Even if we have what we consider a victory, we will still have to live with those who disagree, and that should shape how we act with them. Like Beit Hillel, we need to respect their views, try to understand them, and maybe even open up the possibility that on some points, we might agree with them, or at least acknowledge that their arguments have some merit.

I realize that advocating for this attitude toward opponents is not a popular point of view. But if demonizing those who disagree with us was going to move us forward, it already would have. If dividing the world into like-minded people and enemies was going to be productive, we would be living in a quite different atmosphere. And if ignoring the arguments of those who stand in our way was going to make them disappear, the world would be a much quieter place. The way we have been pursuing large-scale change, whether we like it or not, is simply not working. It's time to try to change the way we are trying to change the world. And

¹² Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 13b.

that requires first, trying to change ourselves, second, trying to change our relationships, and then applying the lessons of those changes to the biggest problems facing us.

Are we changing the world? We have so many paths to change open to us. As I said at the start, the word *shanah* that we translate as “year” could just as easily be read as “change.” So when we wish each other a *shanah tovah*, we are wishing for a good change, a lasting, productive and nourishing change, for ourselves, for our relationships, and for our world. *L’shanah tovah tikateivu* – may we each have the strength and the courage to create good change, so that we can say with full hearts, yes, the world has changed because of me; it has become sweeter, more full of blessing, of joy, and of peace. *L’shanah tovah!*