

Dedicating Our Hands to Peace

Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles, Rosh Hashanah 5787

Look at your hands. Their softness, their callouses. Look at that freckle. That birthmark. That scar. From cutting an onion years ago. Or having a melanoma removed. Look at your nails, bare or polished. Look at your fingers. The first thing that was checked when you were born, ten fingers, ten toes. Look at the whorl of ridges that make your thumbprint. Remember the time one got jammed playing football, or yanked by a dog's leash, or caught in a door. Splinters. Papercuts. Burns. Perhaps you're wearing a ring. An heirloom from a loved one. Or a ring you bought yourself. Or one that came with a vow. Look at your knuckles, the stories scribed in their zigzags and creases. When were your hands open and generous this year? Look at your palm. Your lifeline, heart line, sun line, fate line. What have these hands built? What have they yet to build?

There's a verse in Tanach (II Samuel 24:14) where King David says to his prophet, "Let us fall into the hands of God, whose compassion is great; and let me not fall into human hands."

Let me not fall into human hands.

Why not? Hands that have held babies, tested foreheads for fevers, folded warm towels, chopped veggies for cholents and chilis, penned poems, painted murals, planted flowers.

Rather, let me not be bereft of human hands. Let me not be deprived of touch, community, hands helping hands.

But that's not what David meant, of course.

“Let me not fall into human hands.”

Hands that throw stones, lift daggers, point guns and pull triggers. Let us not fall into hands fueled by rage. Hands that throw firebombs into temples, set fire to kosher restaurants. Hands that vandalize Jewish businesses and schools. The hands that choked a Jewish man in Los Angeles, the hand that stabbed two Jewish men with a screwdriver in New York City, the fists that attacked a Jewish mother and daughter in Thailand.

And when that story broke, the brutal assault of mother and daughter, causing severe head trauma, both needing surgery, the thousands of hands pounding their keyboards with a chorus of support for the attacker. “Not all heroes wear capes,” typed hundreds of hands, and tens of thousands more fingers hitting “like, like, like” under every sickening comment. Hundreds of thousands of hands, applauding for Jewish hate.

Let this people not fall into those human hands, like victims in a horror film, dragged down by hordes of clawing, clamoring, rotten hands. Except these are not zombies - brainless, undead - these are not animals – territorial, instinctive. These are neighbors, coworkers, classmates. All too human hands.

Let us not fall into human hands.

The developers of AI, wanting it to sound supportive and conversational instead of cold and robotic, programmed the system to often use the word human. Someone tells a chat bot, “I just left my wife and kids,” and it responds, “That’s very human of you.” Or, “I

just robbed a bank,” and it responds, “You’re human, and you need self-care too. Here’s a list of other banks near you.”

As if “to be human” just means lovably imperfect. Adorable. “I’m only human!”

But “human” is also a contronym, meaning one thing and its opposite. Like how “dusting” means adding powdered sugar to a cake, or wiping it off the counter. “Human” can mean good, as in “human decency,” or bad, “as in human cruelty.”

In the opening chapter of *Our Inner Ape*, Frans de Waal writes:

“The power-hungry and brutal chimp contrasts with the peace-loving and erotic bonobo—a kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Our own nature is an uneasy marriage of the two.”

Once, during a preschool Purim Shpiel, while the children were all swinging their groggers and booing Haman, there was one boy screaming “Boo, Human!” And I didn’t know if the four-year-old was just confused about the name of the archetypal enemy of the Jewish people, or if he was making a profound observation about human nature, that humankind is often inhumane and unkind, that if you had to choose to be alone in a forest with a bear or a man, man is not always the obvious choice.

Look at your hands. When were your hands clenched with anger this year? Anxiety? Resolve? What have these hands taken apart? What have they withheld? What have they torn down?

On Yom Kippur, we will recite a litany of sins, and our hand will be in a fist, knocking on our heart. *Ashamnu. Bagadnu.* We have abused, we have betrayed, we have been cruel. Our fist trying to grasp our

culpability in it all. Each confession of the heart could be accompanied by a gesture, the way sign language sculpts the air:

For the sin we have sinned against You by dismissing others (flick of the hand), gossiping (hand shielding mouth), by withholding support (hand pulling away), by fighting (hand in fist), by destroying (hands snapping something in two)

Rabbi Max Artz wrote: “These confessions are prompted by the belief that sin distorts and diminishes the divine image in which man was created.”

Look at your hands. Do you consider them of the animal kingdom, evolved of opposable-thumbed chimps and bonobos, or fashioned after divinity? Pinched of clay and animated by Gdbreath. How different are these hands from talons and claws. How do our confessions and supplications scrub out the damned spots that distort the divine image, and restore our hands to building a better world? Instruments of delivering life rather than ending it?

It’s written in Genesis 6:5-7: “Gd saw how... every plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil all the time.”

Is human nature good or bad? Judaism doesn’t believe in original sin, that we are born inherently wicked. But Genesis does say, at least for the generation of the flood, that every plan devised by the human mind was evil all the time. And that the *yetzer hara*, translated as the “evil inclination”, is not an external demonic force, a devil on your shoulder, but rather a person’s basic, natural instinct. And here’s the beauty of these holy days. This audacious attempt to collectively change human nature. The core belief that the soul is

pure, and can be saved from its basest instincts not by divine intervention, but by human action. By this. Hands linking with hands in community. Holding prayerbooks. Musicians playing piano, strumming strings, tapping drums, channeling the power of hands into music that elevates. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are about unlocking the potential for good in these hands.

Let us not fall into allowing our hands to be instruments of hurt. We cannot control the hands of those fueled by hate. As Dara Horn said in her new book, “We are not responsible for curing the pathologies of our harassers.” But we can learn to control these hands.

There is a Jewish concept called the *rodef*. The word *rodef* means “pursuer.” In the Talmud, a *rodef* is one who pursues another to kill them. And if a *rodef* is chasing another, you are obligated to stop them, even if it means killing them. And sometimes the *rodef* is very clear. And other times, it can be complex, as Diana Goldsmith once wrote, “Whoever is deemed a *rodef* is subjective based on one’s biases.”

To Renee Good, ICE agents hunting immigrants were *rodefs*. The ICE agent thought she was the *rodef*. In pointing his gun at her and killing her, he became the *rodef*.

Goldsmith wrote: “Whether it is black men and women murdered by police officers, LGBTQ+ individuals savagely beaten by homophobic people, Jews and Muslims gunned down while praying by gun-toting nationalists, migrant families being stripped of their basic human rights by merciless politicians... — these marginalized groups are isolated and attacked by those who would unjustifiably deem them a threat to their way of life. And in doing so, the

supposed *rodef* becomes the victim, and the pursuer the *rodef*... Thus begins a vicious cycle of brutality.”

She wrote that in 2018, and it’s only become more entangled. On October 7, the *rodef* crashed through the security fence to slaughter people at the Nova festival and kibbutzim. And then came the blood of war, and the simultaneous bitter war of words, hundreds of thousands of hands at their keyboards, calling Israel the *rodef*, Netanyahu the *rodef*, settlers the *rodef*.

And you could make the case for any culture, it’s not unique to us. The history of Christianity, Islam, empires, countries, communities, tribes, when the pursuer, when the pursued.

But what is unique is the new twist on the concept of the *rodef* taught by the Jewish sage Hillel. Hillel, who famously said, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.”

He said, *Ohev shalom v’rodef shalom*. “Be a lover of peace, and pursuer of peace.” (Pirkei Avot 1:12).

He turned the *rodef* into a contronym. Not a pursuer intent on violence, but a *rodef shalom*.

And it’s a fascinating twist. Because he is saying that not only should one be an *ohev shalom*, a lover of peace. We’re all lovers of peace. Sure, we want peace. We’re all aboard the peace train. Saying give peace a chance. Believe we believe it. But Hillel says we should also be *rodef shalom*, channeling the same energy of a *rodef*, pursuing peace the way a wolf pursues a gazelle. Urgently. Aggressively. Hungrily.

We can only break the cycle of rodefs, this endless spiral of revenge, if we realign our minds and direct our hands to pursue peace.

If we look at our hands, and really ask ourselves, how have my hands worked to pursue peace this year? What have my hands posted on social media behind anonymous usernames? What have I held up as important? What have I held back?

What price have my hands been willing to pay in the pursuit of peace? Because peace is pricey. It's right there in the Hebrew. The words for peace is *shalom*, and the verb "to pay" is *l'shalem*. To make something whole there is a cost. And often the price is pride.

There are synagogues named Rodef Shalom, and it's a great name. Our own community's namesake, the Prophet Isaiah, has great wisdom.

In Isaiah it is written (Isaiah 1:15-17)

"Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves clean... Cease to do evil; Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; Aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; Defend the cause of the widow."

This is the beauty of our tradition, these holy days, right now. This synchronized effort to change human nature, cease to do evil, rewrite Genesis from "every plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil all the time" to "every plan was for the sake of peace."

How do these hands become proactive instruments of peace, and what are these hands willing to pay to make space for peace?

How do we stop ourselves from being rodefers, pursuers of revenge, of victory, vindication? Can I relinquish pride so that a relationship can become whole? Peace may require effort, risk, compromise, embarrassment. It means stopping obsession over who is the rodef, and working on yourself being a rodef shalom. It means unclenching from long held resentments. It means not pointing at others.

It means braiding challah and bringing it to a neighbor. It means writing postcards to stand up for civil rights. It means trying a new recipe, vegetarian shepherd's pie or crispy gnocchi with brown butter, knowing that the meat industry uses two hundred times the amount of water as data centers. We know things but aren't willing to pay the price. We love nature, but sit on our hands instead of protecting it. We love peace, but cover our eyes when we don't like what we see.

How do we become pursuers of peace? Wait until morning before sending that email. Resist forwarding the incendiary post, even when you agree with it. Check whether the outrageous thing you just read is actually true.

Give up the pleasure of a clever insult. Call someone you've been avoiding. Apologize without explaining why you were right. Forgive someone who never gave you the apology you deserved. Be willing to lose an argument. Let someone else have the last word.

Learn the history of a people whose history you were never taught. Read books by authors of other ethnicities. Ask more questions. Learn a new language. Listen to the music of other cultures.

Say “I don’t know” and “Tell me more.” Give blood. Lower your voice when everyone else raises theirs. Teach a child how to disagree, and how to deal with disappointment.

Mourn the children on the other side. Reject the seductive simplicity of “us” and “them.” Believe the person across from you is more than the worst thing they have ever said, done, or voted for.

During the early days of Covid-19, when we were all obsessively washing and sanitizing our hands, writer Dori Midnight wrote:

we are humans relearning to wash our hands.

wash your hands

like you are washing the only teacup left that your great grandmother carried across the ocean, like you are washing the hair of a beloved who is dying...

it is time

to care for one another

to pray over water

to wash away fear

every time we wash our hands

Look at your hands. Their softness, their callouses. Heart line, lifeline, sun line, fate line. Let us fall into human hands that strive for peace. Let us be those hands.

With your dominant hand, put out your pinkie like this. That’s how you fingerspell the letter “i” in America Sign Language. Now, make an “l” with your pointer and thumb. Now, with just your pinkie and thumb out, that’s a “y”. If you put them all together, you have this,

which is how you say “I love you.” And if you cross your pointer and middle, it means “I *really* love you.”

Hold up your “I really love you” to someone sitting far from you. Across the aisle. In the balcony. Look at your hands, telling you to love yourself, telling you to love others as you love yourself.

Let these hands, these beautiful hands, be pursuers of peace.

Let us be supported by these beautiful hands. Let these hands, God, be Your hands, whose compassion is so great .

.Amen.