

Out of the Drive-Thru and Into the Coffee Shop: Inviting Authentic Relationships

Rabbi D'ror Chankin-Gould | Anshe Emet Synagogue

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Shanah Tovah.

In my house, I'm usually the first person up and about. I have always been an early morning riser. With one caveat: I need caffeine. Recently, I was standing in the kitchen, early in the morning, rubbing my eyes, grumbling, and generally being a grouch, when my son wisely said to me, "Papa, don't be mad, but I think it would be a good idea if you had some caffeine *now*." Smart Kid.

My friend Beth told me that this year her 12-year-old got started on a morning coffee routine of his own. This summer, Beth and Asher got into a pattern of driving through Dunkin' Donuts on the way to camp. They would pull through the line, Beth would get her iced green tea, and Asher would order his caramel cappuccino, and they were off to start the day.

One morning, Beth switched things up. She told her 12-year-old, "Asher, today, let's go into the coffee shop instead of the drive-thru." Asher balked. "But mom, I can get exactly what I want without getting out of the car! There's no point." Beth insisted. If you want your coffee, this morning we are going inside. Asher begrudgingly followed his mother inside the Dunkin' Donuts. He dragged his feet. He rolled his eyes. But he tagged along nevertheless. While in line, Asher focused on the Duo-lingo he was working on his cell phone: he's been teaching himself Hindi (just for fun)... he's *also* a smart kid.

When they reached the counter to order their drinks, Beth noticed that the barista had a name that sounded like he might be from South Asia. She asked the gentleman what languages he spoke, noting that her son (who was, of course, looking down at his phone) is teaching himself Hindi. The barista perked up, "*I* speak Hindi" he said! Asher looked up-immediately he and the barista started chatting in Hindi. Asher received encouragement (and a few grammatical corrections). It made his day. It also made the barista's day.

Asher came away smiling. On the way out the door, Beth turned to Asher and said, "*That* is why it pays to get out of the drive-thru and go into the coffee shop."

Beth and Asher hit on something that we could all do to think about on Rosh HaShanah: the difference between the drive thru and the coffee shop. When you drive through a restaurant, you speak to a disembodied voice. You order the goods or services you are hoping to receive. You receive those goods and services. You drive away. There is no substantive interaction between human beings. There is no exchange of names. There are rarely even greetings. The two human beings interacting (one in the car, one speaking through their microphone) have no lasting impact on one another. It's efficient in terms of a transaction: nothing more and nothing less.

When you walk into a coffee shop, you have a chance to interact in an entirely different fashion. There can be eye contact. There can be an exchange of names. People can touch one another and reach one another and impact one another. In the drive-thru, Asher would never have engaged in

a Hindi conversation with the barista. In the coffee shop, Asher had the chance to learn and grow. In the coffee shop, the barista had the chance to become more than the means by which a caramel frappuccino was delivered: he was a human being. And he too, was touched.

In thinking about this anecdote, I spoke with a colleague who previously served as a barista, to ask her about her experiences. The colleague shared with me that amongst baristas there is a despised customer behavior that is all too common. The customer approaches the counter. The barista asks, “How are you today?” The customer answers, “I would like a mocha soy late, grande.” In that moment, the barista understands their role: they are a means by which a good will be delivered. They cease to be a person with thoughts and feelings of their own. This is transactional. Nothing more. Nothing less. In other words, we can have in person encounters, which are actually more like drive-thrus than like coffee shops... even when they take place IN coffee shops.

The truth is we all have drive-thru relationships. Think of your place of work for a moment. Think of the person in your office who you know the least well. Perhaps think of a member of the security team or the maintenance team or the IT team or someone simply not in your department or not of your rank. Do you know where she was born? Do you know what hobbies he does on the weekend? Do you know what they hope to accomplish in the next 5 years? If you are like me, there is at least one person in your regular pattern of daily life, with whom you have a drive-thru relationship. Perhaps it’s the nurse at the doctor’s office. Perhaps it’s your child’s teacher. Perhaps it’s the doorman in your building. You see one another. You are pleasant and polite. You provide each other with the goods or services that are required. But the interaction is flat and one-note and not truly impactful. As uncomfortable as it is to admit, the relationship isn’t that different than the disembodied voice in the drive-thru.

Even in our most intimate relationships, we have drive-thru *moments*. The people we are the closest to in the world, the ones who we love and cherish, are still sometimes encountered in “drive-thru *mode*.” For example, when one spouse comes home, walks through the door and says, “Did you walk the dog yet?” or “Is dinner ready?” - this is a drive-thru moment in the context of an otherwise intimate relationship. Rather than a mutual and loving exchange, that particular moment is purely transactional. Think about a relationship in your life with a child or a parent or a sibling. You receive a call. The question is, “Can I borrow some money from you?” or “Would you sign this document?” You might be happy to do these things. But when there isn’t an additional, “How are you today?” with an authentic pause so that you could share what’s going on in your life... you may feel that you have become an ATM rather than a family member. The truth is we all have these moments. We are busy. We are stressed. We are rushed. There are good reasons why these habits take hold. But when we slip into allowing those moments to become more and more frequent, what do we lose? Connection. Inspiration. Wisdom. Closeness. If we look back on the year that was, all too often, we interacted with strangers, friends, and even family as if we were in the drive-thru.

The famous Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, wrote a piece called “*Tayarim*”/“Tourists” which vividly illustrates this concept. He writes:

Visits of condolence is all we get from them.
They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,
They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall
And they laugh behind heavy curtains
In their hotels.
They have their pictures taken
Together with our famous dead
At Rachel's Tomb and Herzl's Tomb
And on Ammunition Hill.
They weep over our sweet boys
And lust after our tough girls
And hang up their underwear
To dry quickly
In cool, blue bathrooms.

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower,
I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists
was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You see
that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch
from the Roman period. Just right of his head." "But he's moving, he's moving!"

אמרתי בלבי: הגאולה תבוא רק אם יגידו
להם: אתם רואים שם את הקשת מן התקופה הרומית?
לא חשוב: אבל לידה, קצת שמאלה ולמטה ממנה, יושב
אדם שקנה פרות וירקות לביתו.

I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them,
"You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it,
left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."

We have the capacity to walk through life as if in a drive through, where people become transactions, objects, markers of space and time. We also have the capacity, to enter the coffee shop, to see each other in our fullness, to connect in substantive ways, to lift up the humanity in one another.

We won't be able to eradicate all the drive-thru moments from our life. There are times when the clock and our stress and the limits of our capacity will dictate otherwise. But this Rosh HaShanah, if we want to heed the poet's message, then bringing redemption closer, means minimizing and mitigating the quantity of our drive-thru moments. Bringing redemption means, every once in a while, stepping out of the drive thru and into the coffee shop. When a barista asks, "What's your name?" in order to write it down, what would it take to simply ask, "What's yours?" And then to say, for example, "Thank you, Andy." What would it take to pause before asking someone to fix your computer and first inquire, "How was your weekend?" What would it take to first ask your roommate or spouse or family member or friend, "How did the doctor

appointment go?” or “How was that meeting at work?” before asking about the mail or the dog or dinner?

At the start of this New Year, we have an opportunity to take an honest *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting for who we’ve been, and who we want to become. And we have the opportunity to do *teshuvah*, to make a plan to become better versions of ourselves.

One of the symbols of Rosh HaShanah is the pomegranate. Some theorize that this is because our ancestors believed that the pomegranate had 613 seeds, representing the 613 mitzvot. This year, I invite you to think of those 613 seeds a bit differently: these are our interactions during the year. There are 613 (and more) opportunities to connect with strangers, colleagues, friends, and family. This past year, how many of those seeds, in all honesty, represent flat, transactional moments? How many of those seeds were drive-thru interactions? This past year, how many of those seeds represent mutual exchanges of interest and affection and growth? How many of those seeds came from inside the coffee shop?

In the year that comes, let’s commit to more coffee shop and less drive-thru. May we seize the opportunity to look in our fellow human’s eyes, connect with their story, and see them in their fullness. May we be greeted with the same. If we do, it will be a very sweet new year indeed.

Shanah Tovah Umetukah.