

Sermon: An Emotionally Healthy You Going Into the New Year

Rabbi Idan Irelabder - Yom Kippur Morning sermon, 5784

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” This is what is known as the Serenity Prayer, composed by Reinhold Niebuhr, an influential American theologian and social activist. The prayer has also been embraced by Alcoholics Anonymous as a cornerstone of their Twelve Step program, and is adhered to by other rehabilitation organizations. The Serenity Prayer can serve us all well.

I remember how challenging the start of the pandemic was, marked by seclusion at home, apprehension stemming from the unknown, daily influx of new decrees and instructions, and rumors that only served to compound confusion and fear. Through this experience, shared with the entire global community, we learned of aspects within our power to alter, and elements—however saddening—that we are unable to change, despite our fervent desire to do so.

Simultaneously, we should summon the courage to bring about change in those areas within our influence, especially during challenging times. This responsibility extends not only to ourselves but also to our immediate family members, and to the broader community. In doing so, we must cultivate patience and tolerance.

While we have no control over other people’s actions, we possess the ability to restrain ourselves. When we manage to cultivate this ability, we are better positioned to respond thoughtfully and not impulsively.

This is a fun story that illustrates that.

Janice was walking behind a mother pushing her toddler in the shopping cart at the supermarket. She noticed that when they passed by the cookie shelf, the girl asked for cookies, and the mother said, "No!"

The girl started to howl, shout, and create a commotion, but the mother kept her composure and said calmly, "Okay, Tammy. We'll finish here soon. Don't get upset, just a little more."

Then they reached shelves full of candies. The girl started screaming and demanding sweets. The mother refused to buy them for her. The girl started

raging, but the mother didn't lose her temper, "Enough, Tammy, enough. Don't get angry. Two more aisles to go. Be patient, just a little more."

When they got to the cash register to pay for the groceries, the girl's eyes met the colorful gum, and she demanded some. Her mother again refused, and the girl made a loud scene of crying and shouting. The mother spoke in a calm and quiet voice, "Tammy, don't get angry. We'll soon finish here, five more minutes, and we'll be outside in our car, driving home."

The mother finished paying and left the supermarket. On their way to the car, the woman who was walking behind them and happened to check out behind them, turned to the mother and said, "Excuse me, madam. I couldn't help but notice how you kept your cool. I have to compliment you on the way you behaved with little Tammy."

The mother smiled and said, "The little one is Monica... I'm Tammy."

Individuals who exhibit control often speak from a place of wisdom, as they take the time to understand others. They recognize that time has the power to soften the impact of mistakes, and that by practicing restraint, we can become more compassionate, forgiving, aware, happy, and grateful individuals. The decision to be governed by impatience and intolerance, and to allow anger to impact our lives rests within us. Embracing the qualities of control and patience can lead to improved outcomes and a more peaceful and balanced life. When we approach situations armed with strong personal tools, we develop a better understanding of other perspectives and contribute to a more harmonious and empathetic world. Rabbi Hillel the Elder was known for his great patience. He used to say that whoever chooses to be angry will end up being angry. The teachings of Ethics of the Fathers, found in the Talmud, emphasizes that we shouldn't judge our friends until we've walked in their shoes—imagining what our own behavior or decision making would be like under the precise conditions that have had an effect on theirs. Only then would it be easier to see how their words and deeds have often been influenced by their experiences, and the tools they have had to navigate their own life. The only thing you can truly control is yourself. Part of that is in having patience and understanding toward someone who might frustrate or anger you.

But, not all relationships are repairable. When you detect that someone seeks to sow discord, after doing so repeatedly for no reason, give yourself permission to walk away. Forgiveness is something you should grant to yourself as you would to

anyone else. That doesn't mean giving up a high standard, but it does mean that it's optimal to strive for a healthy relationship with yourself and demand a healthy relationship from others in turn.

And when a situation warrants that you be the one to step up to rectify it—do, so.

I would like to offer another story, one that illustrates that:

Daniel and Michael had been best friends since childhood, from the very first moment they met. They felt like brothers. However, after their military service, an argument tore them apart, transforming brothers into enemies. Communication ceased. Daniel recognized that a considerable share of the blame rested with him.

Admitting this aloud proved challenging. Yet over the years, the absence of Michael's presence weighed heavily on him. And so, Daniel undertook a journey to Michael's home in the far north to seek forgiveness. He parked outside Michael's house, sitting in his car for a lengthy time span; the urge to knock on Michael's door and apologize was overpowering. But so was his fear. Daniel eventually stepped out, approached Michael's front door, stood there for an extended moment, but then he turned around and left. Daniel didn't realize how hard it would be to apologize. He got into the car and left. On the way home, thoughts of his dear friend and the longing for his presence haunted him. How much longer would this senseless game of pride, or fear, persist?

Then, one day, Daniel tried again. He arrived at Michael's house, knocked on the door, and a woman answered. She inquired about his name, to which he responded. She examined Daniel and then requested, "Wait a moment, please." She returned with a note, handed it to Daniel, and explained how Michael succumbed to an illness but that he left a note for him in his will.

The note bore these words: "Dear friend, please know that despite our dispute, I never stopped loving you and thinking of you, but I wanted you to be the one to initiate mending our bond by acknowledging your mistake. I was a fool. When you stood outside my house some time ago, I saw you through the window and wished fervently that you'd knock, but you turned away and left. I yearned to chase after you, but I couldn't. If you're reading this letter, you've returned to my home. I just want you to know that I forgave you a long time ago."

Many actions can be justified, and many excuses can have solid and genuine foundations, yet not all do. The first story reflects the first part of the serenity prayer, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." The

second story reflects “the courage to change the things I can.” But what is as critical, and what too many people beat themselves up over is the last part, “and the wisdom to know the difference.” Nonetheless, it’s best to expel darkness and pain from our hearts and replace them with light and peace. The secret lies in our choice—the choice to heal what's possible, while it's still within our power to do so.

Live in the moment and be wholly present for it. Rid yourself of toxic surroundings, embrace loved ones with hugs, and express your feelings to them. Let it all be spoken and done today, as tomorrows keep getting away from us.

May we be sealed for another year, a year filled with good health, “the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” And let us say: Amen.