

Rabbi Micah Citrin
Rosh Hashanah 5772
Quest for Compassion: A Letter to Father Gregory Boyle

Dear Father Gregory Boyle,

It is not every day that a rabbi writes to a Jesuit priest, but I feel compelled to do so. This summer, as I began to search for the right message I would deliver on Rosh Hashanah, my quest brought me into the office of our senior rabbi. He said that I had to read your book, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. When the senior rabbi says that you have to read something, you read it. I am thankful to Rabbi Eisner for recommending your book, and I am grateful that you wrote it. I do not recall crying my way through a book as I did with *Tatoos on the Heart* since I read *Where the Red Fern Grows* over 25 years ago as a 10 year old boy. Your sacred work, the slow work, as you call it, in the projects and the *barrios* of Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles deeply moved me: helping individuals uncover their self worth, providing gang members with jobs through Homeboy Industries, the organization you founded so that communities could work their way out of the vicious cycle of gang violence.

There is a word in Hebrew that captures the essence of your book. The word is *chesed* and it roughly translates to “loving kindness” or “compassion”. Until I read your book, *chesed* was an idea. I knew what *chesed* meant in theory, but not as a true practice, or a perspective that can permeate our lives. I feel conspicuous admitting this, especially since I plan on sharing this letter with the congregation on Rosh Hashanah, but it has taken the teaching of a Catholic priest for *chesed* to hit me in the *kishkas*, the gut as we say in Yiddish, and open my eyes to its power. As I read, my heart broke thinking about where *chesed* is lacking in the world, where it is anemic in my life, and perhaps even the life of my congregants. But then *chesed*, compassion, is not the domain of just one religion. As you have taught, it is God’s domain, and humanity’s if we choose to accept it as our inheritance.

On the Jewish New Year, when we examine our souls and look into our hearts, when we recall a world continually being renewed by the Source of Life, the message of *chesed* is urgent. I believe that it is a message that my congregation needs to hear. And as an assistant dean of my seminary once told me, as clergy, we give the sermons we need to hear. This year, I need to hear it. I want to take this time to reflect back to you and my community what you have taught me about *chesed*, and how boundless compassion, as you so rightly call it, must be the foundation of our lives and our bridge to the Holy One and one another.

One of my favorite stories that you tell is about Cesar. Between laughter and tears, Cesar’s story taught me about the very root of *chesed*. I can imagine you

standing in JC Penny with Cesar, this tattooed gang banger, fresh out of prison, as you helped him to grow his wardrobe beyond what he left prison with, literally the clothes on his back. Like so many of the other people you describe in the book, Cesar was a young man raised in poverty with parents who perhaps had more interest in drugs than their child, adopted into the violence of gang life, incarcerated. And yet, underneath this exterior, was a “disarming sweet soul” as you put it. Oblivious to his countenance and the reaction he was getting from those around him, Cesar proceeded to engage the other customers in conversation until he realized that they only saw his outside. “Damn, do I look that scary?” he asked out loud. Your nod in the affirmative brought everyone around you to laughter. There is clearly a disconnect between this fearsome looking dude, and what he knows he is on the inside.

What happened next, in the middle of the night, goes to the heart of the matter. You write, “At three o’clock in the morning, the phone rings. It’s Cesar. He says what every *homie* says when they call in the middle of the night, ‘Did I wake you?’ I always think, *Why no, I was waiting and hoping that you’d call.* Cesar is sober and it’s urgent that he talk to me. ‘I got to ask you a question. You know how I’ve always seen you as my father...Well, hafta ask you a question.’ Now Cesar pauses, and the gravity of it all makes his voice waver and crumble, ‘Have I...been...your son?’ Oh, hell, yeah, I say. ‘Whew,’ Cesar exhales, ‘I thought so.’ Now his voice becomes enmeshed in gentle sobbing. ‘Then I will be your son. And you will be my father. And nothing will separate us, right?’ That’s right. In this early morning call Cesar did not discover that he has a father. He discovered that he is a son worth having.”¹

When I read this, it hit me. How often do we go through life neglecting to tell our sons that they are worth having, that our daughters are worthy of our love? How often do we forget to turn to our parents, and see them as people, not only worthy of our love, but in need of hearing it? How shameful that we throw around the words, “I love you” with our spouses in the hustle and bustle of life, but don’t stop to say, “You deserve to be loved.” *Chesed*, boundless compassion begins between two individuals, it begins at home with families. It is our capacity to give the ones we love the permission to be loved, to acknowledge that they are worth our ultimate care. Father Boyle, you teach that our choice is not to focus on the narrow things in life, which too often for me is the self, but to *narrow* our focus on the ones around us who need us most, who are in need of our boundless compassion. If we truly belong to each other, as you suggest, then narrowing our focus on the ones to whom we belong begins the process of allowing our *chesed* to seep into the brokenness.

The fact is we are all a little bit broken. Some of us are a lot broken, I suppose, but as the great 19th century Hasidic rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav once said, there is nothing more whole than a broken heart. At our season of Rosh Hashanah

¹ Boyle, Gregory. *Tattoos on the Heart* p.p. 28-32

and Yom Kippur we cannot begin our renewal or affect change in the world without first recognizing the brokenness. I think that this is the first step in atoning for our sins. We Jews get a little uncomfortable when we start talking about sin. Not that we don't do it, but it sounds like Christian speak. And while we might commit sins, or make mistakes, don't call us sinners, it makes us itch a bit. But maybe we have something to learn from you, maybe we are all sinners, especially if we take to heart your definition of being a sinner. A sinner, you teach, is an outcast, someone who because of his deeds has been exiled. Each of us is a sinner because in some way, each of us is an outcast, an exile. We become alienated from ourselves and from God through destructive and hurtful actions and behaviors.

Thank you for finally helping me to understand what I first encountered in 11th grade English class when studying American colonial literature. Now I get what the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards meant when he thundered, "We are all sinners in the hands of an angry God." We have been cast out from the best of who we are, and we have been estranged from one another. The part that Edwards got wrong is that we are not in the hands of an angry God, we are in the hands of a loving a God, the infinite fountain of *chesed*. It is we who are angry, and too often we treat one another accordingly. We direct our own feelings of alienation toward others, we put up barriers, and we exclude.

Living *chesed* is the opposite; it is breaking down barriers. "Compassion", you write, "isn't just about feeling the pain of others; its about bringing them in toward yourself. If we love what God loves, then in compassion, margins get erased."² In your words, it is about standing with others. When you described your work in the projects and *barrios*, it was clear how poverty, lack of educational opportunities, and broken homes led young people to build barriers through gangs. The result of these barriers took the ultimate toll, people were killed in the name of these divisions, both gang banger and bystander alike. I felt ashamed then, when I thought about my own privileged community. We have every opportunity in the world and yet we put up barriers and exclude those around us. We have taught our children, tacitly at least, that it is ok for there to be an "in crowd" and that ignoring or ostracizing another is our prerogative if they are different from us. Too many of our children are victims of bullying. And I would be devastated to know if any children in my synagogue are bullies themselves. When we are mean to others we also hurt ourselves. I pray that the children in my synagogue act with compassion, and stand with kids in their schools who are teased, picked on, and put down. Our children learn from our examples. In our places of work and even in our synagogues we act as if others have the burden of proof to show that they are worthy of our time, our attention, our compassion. If we can begin to recognize in the other what we run from in ourselves, that on some level we all have an element of being an outsider, of being weak, then we will begin to stand with each other, to learn that we belong to each other. There

² Boyle, Gregory. *Tattoos on the Heart* p. 75

is no better place to practice this expression of *chesed* than in our synagogues, schools, and places of work. Then, we begin to expand the ripples of *chesed*, and we heal what is broken in us and in others.

Bringing *chesed* into our homes and communities breathes life and wholeness into each of us. While starting to practice *chesed* with those in our immediate circle takes effort and focus, it is infinitely easier than showing the one who is not like us that she is worthy of our love and concern. You teach that compassion is about standing with someone, casting our lot with them, even if they are radically different from us. In a Talmudic story Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asks the prophet Elijah when the Messiah will come. Elijah responds, "Why don't you ask him yourself? He is sitting among the beggars and lepers at the gates of Rome, untying and retying his bandages, ready for when the world will need him."³

Father Boyle, it seems to me that the world is in great need of the messiah now, but fear, self absorption, callousness prevent us from standing within the gates of Rome with the downtrodden. When we pass the homeless man on the street we might think about serving him food in a shelter, or giving her a few dollars, but we do not see that this person could be us. Sometimes we are too weak and scared to look. But *chesed* is the antidote and you taught me that jurisdiction and feeling a sense of kinship with the other are essential ingredients to living *chesed*.

I love the story you tell about Junior, the man who spent his days hanging out his window, drinking forties, and watching the world go by. You write, "One day as I'm walking past, lost in my own thoughts, I fail to see him. Then after I had gone beyond his apartment and the alley, Junior screams full throttle, "LOVE YOU G-DOG." This stops me in my tracks as it does a few other people. I'm always startled by the way folks and homies tell you that they love you...I retrace my steps and am now standing under his window looking up. "Thank you, Junior. That was a very nice thing to say." Junior waves me on, as if Papally blessing me as my day begins. "Oh, come on now, G, you know," he says spinning his hand in a circular motion, "You're in my jurisdiction." And then you say it, Father Boyle, in your straightforward way. You write, "I can't be entirely sure what Junior meant. Except for the fact that we all need to see that we are in each other's 'jurisdictions,' spheres of acceptance – only all of the time. And yet, there are lines that get drawn, and barriers erected, meant only to exclude. Allowing folks into my jurisdiction requires that I dismantle what I have set up to keep them out."⁴

That is what *chesed* is, Father Boyle, to see those around us as part of our circle of concern. But we don't spend enough time on our balconies like Junior, and if we do, we often filter out the unpleasant sights. If we want to take *chesed* seriously, we have to see the 40 million Americans living without health

³ Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 98a

⁴ Boyle, Gregory. *Tattoos on the Heart* p.p. 129-130

insurance in the faces of families, waiting in emergency rooms just to see a doctor. One in five children live in hunger in this country. I have to see their faces in the faces of the children I teach at synagogue, and in the faces of my sons as we are blessed to share a meal each night. We have to have enough *chesed* for the family that is undocumented, who is the stranger, and who, out of love, God has commanded my people not to oppress. I have to expand my jurisdiction and look at the man on the street who is homeless, who maybe makes me uncomfortable and see him as a brother. These people have to have a claim on our lives, too.

“The world stands on three things, on Torah, on prayer, and on *gemilut chasadim* – acts of loving kindness.”⁵ This is a well-known passage from *Pirke Avot*, the “Wisdom of our Ancestors” found in the Talmud. It seems that if we don’t figure out what *chesed* means, the whole world is on shaky ground. That’s why Soledad’s story left me awestruck. The foundation of her world was shattered, yet *chesed* flowed from her. Here was a mother of four who held one of her sons as he bled to death from gun shot wounds. He was a marine home on leave, not a casualty of the Afghan Taliban, but of a gang shooting. Six months later Soledad relived this nightmare as her eldest son was gunned down on her front porch, an unsuspecting bystander in a drive-by shooting. It is inconceivable to me that she can survive this pain, but what is truly remarkable happens later when she was in the emergency room for chest pains, and a teenage boy was rushed in next to her, his body riddled with bullets. She recognized him as a boy from the gang who killed her children. “As I saw this kid,” she tells you, “I just kept thinking of what my friends might say if they were here with me. They’d say ‘Pray that he dies.’ And I began to cry as I have never cried before and started to pray the hardest I’ve ever prayed. ‘Please...don’t...let him die. I don’t want his mom to go through what I have.’”⁶

Soledad’s prayer must be what you mean by “the power of boundless compassion.” True *chesed* has to transcend our need to separate and create boundaries. We excel at creating boundaries, seeing the world through “us and them” eyes. *Chesed* that sustains the world obliterates “us and them,” it makes only us. That is the *chesed* attitude with which we need to live. It is unbelievably simple to say, and an enduring internal struggle to achieve. Soledad would have been justified in her hate. Perhaps it was her sense of *chesed* that set her world on firmer ground, not healed, but grounded.

Father Boyle, this Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur I will stand before the open ark, the Torah’s adorned in their pure, white High Holiday mantles and we will sing the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer. This is a peak moment in the service, and in the New Year season. We address God, “*Avinu Malkeinu* Our Father, our King, *choneinu va’aneinu* be gracious and answer us, *ki ayn banu ma’asim* for we have

⁵ Mishnah *Avot* 1:2

⁶ Boyle, Gregory. *Tattoos on the Heart* p.p. 183-186

little merit, *aseh immanu tzedakah va-chesed* treat us with justice and compassion *v'hoshienu* and save us.” I always feel small in this moment; small in the face of life, small as I ask the Soul of the Universe to help heal my soul, to renew my life in the year ahead, and to have compassion on me in spite of my shortcomings.

Because of your teaching, I understand this prayer in a different light. Not only will I ask God to treat me with *chesed*, but I will pray that I might join with God as a source of *chesed* in this world, that some of God's *chesed* might flow through me. As we celebrate the New Year of 5772 and rejoice in the renewal of the world, I will ask my congregants to dedicate themselves to being sustaining pillars of *chesed*. We do belong to one another and we belong to this world. Thank you for teaching me about the power of boundless compassion, the need to expand our circle of concern, and the imperative to stand with family, friend, and stranger.

With Blessings for the New Year,

Rabbi Micah Citrin