Thinking to be Thoughtful: Thoughts on Parashat Terumah, February 5, 2011

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My wife and I were recently having a quiet dinner in a local kasher restaurant. Before long, a young family was seated at a table across from us. As veteran grandparents, we are used to children making a bit of noise. No problem.

Soon, though, the father took out a camera and started taking photographs, and more photographs, and more photographs. His camera had a flash, and with each photo the flash filled the restaurant and the reflection bounced off the mirrored walls. Aside from being very disturbing to us (and the other patrons of the restaurant), the flashes were painful to our eyes. When our patience finally ran out, we politely asked the father if he could take photographs later, or without the flash.

We thought that a person who received such a complaint would have apologized for having caused us (and others) unpleasantness.

However, the father responded to us in a rude manner, as though we were at fault, as though we had no right to intrude on his freedom, as though he had every right to take photographs no matter how disturbing this was to others. After his outburst, he must have realized he was in the wrong, and he put away the camera; but he did not apologize. On the contrary, he glowered at us angrily.

This week's Torah portion describes the construction work in the ancient Tabernacle, the sanctuary of the Israelites as they traveled in the wilderness. Hovering over the holy ark were two cherubim. "And the cherubim shall spread out their wings on high, screening the ark-cover with their wings, and with their faces one to another; toward the ark-cover shall the faces of the cherubim be." (25:20)

The faces of the cherubim not only had to be toward the ark--but toward each other. A rabbinic interpretation teaches: to face Divinity, we need to face each other. If we are to honor God, we are to honor each other. We need to look into each other's eyes, to see our shared humanity, to deal with each other with

compassion and thoughtfulness.

Too often, people behave in a self-centered fashion, without considering the feelings of others, without thinking how their behavior may cause pain or discomfort to others. Their spiritual vision extends to their own immediate needs and wants; they will do what they choose regardless of how this may impact on others.

Good manners are not a frill, but are essential elements in a religious and righteous life. Good manners demonstrate self-respect and respect for others. Politeness is a sign of kindness and thoughtfulness.

Rudeness is a religious and social deficiency. Thoughtfulness is a religious and social virtue. Let us think carefully so that we act thoughtfully.

Angel for Shabbat