

Sacred Power and Possibility -- Yom Kippur 5768 (2007)

I recently read of a man in England who is suing Royal Cornwall Hospital. Why? Well, it seems that two years ago, he was diagnosed with terminal cancer and told that he only had a short time to live. So, he decided to spend his remaining time in high style. He quit his job. He blew all his savings on fancy restaurants, on hotels, and vacations. "I got rid of everything," said the man – "my car, my clothes, everything."

But, guess what? A year later, it was discovered that the doctors had given him the wrong diagnosis and, much to his disappointment, he's now going to live!

Thinking about this story, it occurred to me that this day, Yom Kippur, is very much like that fateful doctor visit. The Book of Life and Death is open before us, and we're each here to consider our remaining days on earth. Suffice it to say: this man would not necessarily be our role model!

The philosopher Bahya Ibn Pakuda once poignantly observed: "Days are like scrolls; write on them what you want to have remembered." And so it is that the real question of this hour is, what have we written? And, still more important, what can we yet write?

In my experience, there are three qualities, above all others, that most people would like to have remembered about them. First, I know we all would like to be regarded as a good person, as we say, a "mensch." Second, we would very much like it said of us that we truly made time for other people, that we loved and were loved. And third, we would certainly want to be thought of as people who gave of ourselves and left this world a better place.

I know that I am not telling you anything new here. In fact, when we think of our own loved ones who are no longer with us, these are precisely the qualities we would tend to remember about them. But, it does seem to me that life has gotten a lot more complicated in recent years. Because of the unique pressures we live under, the new technology and dynamic trends that drive our world, it just might be a little harder now to achieve those same levels of distinction.

So, let's begin with what it means to be a good person. How do we acquire for ourselves that coveted *keter sheym tov*, that crown of a good name?

There is, perhaps, no greater human struggle than the battle we all do within ourselves to be good. In our darker moments, we might even accuse God – "God, if you wanted me to be good, why did You not create me as a pure human being to begin with?" Why not make it simple, less demanding of us? But that is not what we are. Our rabbis knew well from their own experience, that we were born wrestling with our nature. The *yetzer ra v' tov* – our good and our evil inclination – battle powerfully within every human being, there's no denying it. And our best hope is that, more often than not, the good in us will win.

But, how do we accomplish even that? Given the tremendous power of our ego, of our impulsive selfishness, of our surprising tempers, what is the trick to overcoming our primitive nature, and becoming a person who can instinctively make good choices?

Well, here we can learn something from our philosophers. The great thinkers, like Aristotle and Maimonides, understood that what it really takes is a regimen. For those of you who try to practice good diet and exercise, this is something you already understand. Because it sort of falls under the category of, "you are what you eat." The best way to become a good person, to live the "good life," in a moral sense, is to nourish and condition our character with healthy influences.

Now, looking around at the environment in which we live, most of us would agree that this is especially challenging today. Unlike the time of Aristotle, we are under constant bombardment, hard wired into a 24/7 streaming world of good, bad, and ugly. Unfiltered Internet, satellite radio, cable channels, cell phones, & emails – all invade our space and infiltrate our subconscious like viruses. Even if we wanted to, it would be very difficult to keep it all at bay.

What we expose ourselves to is actually a big question today, especially for our children. I recently heard a statistic that only 1 out of 4 Americans have read a book in the past year. We are clearly witnessing the dumbing down of American culture and we need to be aware of it.

The question we need to ask is, how are we edifying our character and that of our children? Are we reading poetry and philosophy? Are we exposing our children to enough art, music, and theater? Are we honing our intellects, broadening our spirit, opening our hearts to the breadth and depth of human culture? Or, do we mainly sit around and watch T.V. and surf the Net?

And when we're with people, what do we think about and speak about? Moral conditioning means living and breathing in the world of ideas, of culture, of cultivation of the good. Our rabbis said that when two people sit together and no words of Torah pass between them, that is a place of vanity. But, when words of Torah pass between them, the Shechina, the Divine Presence, rests between them.

So, what do we talk about with our family and friends? Are we dumbing down our relationships and demeaning our moral dispositions? Or, does Shechina feel at home in our conversation?

Especially in our day and age, being a good person is a great challenge. All around us is so much vanity and vacuous chatter. But, our rabbis also said, "In a place where there are no menches, strive to be a mensch!" We can raise ourselves above the mundane. We can refine our characters, and condition ourselves in such a way that good choices are more instinctive, and we have to struggle less with our yetzer and all the external forces that seek to drag us down.

So, today we need to honestly ask ourselves, when we read over the scroll of our days, will it reveal that we have refined and enlarged our moral character and striven in the deepest philosophical sense to be a good person? Will the words, *Keter Shem Tov*, the crown of a good name, seal us in the Book of Life? And if not, how can we resolve to become that person in the year ahead?

Next, we have to ask what that scroll says about us and our relationships? Of course, we all want to be a good spouse, a good parent, or child, or sibling, or friend. Yet, is this how the scroll of our days would describe us right now?

Once again, I would observe that the odds could be stacked up against us. This year, a new study was released by the United Nations which ranked the United States and Britain as the worst places, out of 21 developed countries, to be a child!

It seems that because of our dog eat dog work places, parents are putting in longer hours and spending less time with their kids. In the United States, we rank next to last in family relationships, in peer relationship, and in risk-taking behavior in our youth. We are also at the bottom of the scale when it comes to the simplest and perhaps most revealing measurement of all – children eating and talking frequently with their families!

I see it here, even with the most well-intentioned Solel families! Kids constantly on the run. Fewer and fewer family meals at home. Less time for spouses to be together. With all of our kid's activities, the motto Davida and I share in our home is, divide and conquer – you take this one; I'll pick up that one.

But even though we may have an uphill battle because of the pressure cooker lifestyle we Americans seem to live, we do still have some maneuvering room. It requires a little more conscious effort than it may in Spain or the Netherlands, but we can be a good parent, an attentive spouse, a caring sibling or friend. What these studies so clearly show us, is that the key investment is time. Where we spend our time, is the most important indicator of who and what we value most.

Sometime ago, I read of a man who was suddenly called home to the funeral of a very special neighbor. As a young boy, Jack was very close with Mr. Belser. You see, Mr. Belser had no children of his own, so he spent a lot of time with Jack, teaching him the things he thought were important. As

Jack hung up the phone, he thought to himself, “really, were it not for Mr. Belser, I would not be half the person I am today.”

When the funeral was over, Jack stepped one more time into Mr. Belzer’s old house. Everything was exactly as he remembered it. Every picture, every piece of furniture, and they all held a rush of memories. But, as Jack’s eyes scanned the room he was startled to see something missing. That small gold box Mr. Belzer always kept locked on top of the desk was gone. Jack must have asked a thousand times about that box, and all Mr. Belzer would ever say is that it contained the thing he valued the most. Now, Jack thought he would never know what it was that his old friend cherished so much.

Several weeks later, Jack returned home from work to discover a package had arrived. The paper was old and brown, and the handwriting was difficult to read, but the return address read: Mr. Harold Belser. Jack ripped open the package, and there it was – the gold box and an envelope. Jack literally shook as he read the note inside.

“Upon my death, please forward this box and its contents to Jack Bennett. It’s the thing I valued most in my life.” With tears in his eyes, Jack took the small key out of the envelope and unlocked the box. There inside, was a finely etched pocket watch. Opening the cover, he found these words engraved: “Jack, thanks for your time! – Harold Belser.”

The empty columns of our scroll are waiting to be filled in. We are not a statistic, quantified by the United Nations. We are human beings with free will to put our time and energy, not just to the squeaky wheels that demand our instant attention, but to the places where our life receives the most meaning. As this day reminds us, time is our most precious asset. And the surest way to be thought of as a loving person, is to invest our time in the ones we love.

Being a good person, and making time to nurture relationships are two of the most important things people hope to achieve in their lifetimes. The third thing that we would also want inscribed in the record of our deeds is that we are leaving this world a better place.

I would say to you that this is a complicated proposition. Because honestly, it runs counter to today’s prevailing social trend. In a recent book called, “Bowling Alone,” Harvard professor Robert Putnam wrote at length about how Americans are as a whole pulling back from communal engagement. He studied traditional groups like bowling leagues and civic clubs, and what he discovered is that membership is seriously declining, because fewer Americans are joiners anymore.

It’s kind of ironic, if you think about it – as much as we are all networked in this big global village, we’re also becoming more isolated and individualistic. Nowadays, people tend to travel in and out of multiple social groups, in order to use them for the activities or services they provide. The idea of joining a group as a commitment is less significant for Americans. So, our civic organizations, once the cornerstone of American society, are now more weigh stations for fueling up and moving on down the road.

I grew up in the 1950’s and 60’s, and I can clearly recall from my childhood the sense of patriotism that ran deep in this country. Remember those famous presidential words, “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country?” In those days, there were “good citizens,” strangers who even stopped to help a stranded motorist change a flat tire. And in the American Jewish community of that era, Jews affiliated because it was a given that every Jew had an obligation to the Jewish community.

But, now we’re bowling alone – networked in a virtual world-wide-web, yet distant from the neighbors in our own town. And the question is, what will motivate our children to want to give to this world and belong to society?

Perhaps this is where Yom Kippur’s Torah reading might come in. Nitzavim calls us back to the foot of Mt. Sinai and reassembles us as a community. No matter where we have been, no matter how far

away we have traveled on our own personal journeys, this is the day when we rejoin the club, and remember what it means to belong.

On these holidays, I am always in awe, as I stand here and cast my gaze over all of you. You who could be spending your time and money on lots of other things, yet make this a priority. Regardless of how many times during the year you may actually walk through our gates, you are here now. And your presence makes a big statement. Belonging to Temple Solel, means that you believe. You believe in our shared covenant to perpetuate Judaism and this institution, not just for what you get out of it, but for what you are called upon to put into it!

As partners, we stand together – from wood choppers and water drawers, to tribal heads and elders – all in covenantal relationship. And this is the operative mentality of a person who gives to this world.

“Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof – Justice, justice shall you pursue,” the Torah declares. Teaching us that *Tzedek, Tzedakah*, are not about feeling generous and giving from the heart when we’re moved by our compassion. No, true *Tzedakah* is the just and equitable distribution of our resources. *Individuals* give when they feel generous. *Members*, because it is a condition of membership, and a shared promise.

So, as we look over our Book of Life this Yom Kippur, we might pay attention to how our names appear. Is our name set apart like an individual island, isolated and distant from the others? Or is it interlocked with the community of letters assembled at Mt. Sinai? Are we a person who *uses* community, or *belongs* to community, and thus truly feels the responsibility to make the world better?

Our prayerbook says, *“U’netaneh Tokef Kedushat Ha-yom – let us declare the sacred power of this day.”* Like the medical diagnosis that gives us a reprieve, this is the day on which we are all returned to life and given a second chance.

I have never known anyone who, having faced death, has seen life through the same eyes again. They are changed people. From that day forward, they vow to live as better people. They pay far more attention to their relationships and invest in them the time they deserve. And they are eager to re-join the community.

“Days are like scrolls. Write on them what you want to have remembered.” Our scrolls are not yet complete. We still have time to create our legacy. We still have room to write all the things of which we dream, and for which we hope to be remembered. Despite the many new trends and pressures that we pioneers of the new 21st century are navigating, I still believe we can be as great in our humanity, if not greater, than any generation that ever lived.

I once read the chilling story that at Auschwitz in 1944, it had been decided there were too many Jewish children between the ages of twelve and fifteen still alive in the camp. So, it was determined that a mass extermination would be planned for Rosh Hashanah.

The guards would march the children past a stake in the ground, and those whose head reached the top of the stake would be safe, while the rest would be sent to the gas chambers.

When Rosh Hashanah arrived, the spirit of defeat and death hung over the camp. The rabbi walked from group to group, quietly reciting prayers and blowing a shofar he had somehow managed to smuggle in with him.

The condemned children, quarantined in a special barracks, could hear the faint sound of the shofar, and they asked that the rabbi come to them, as well.

And so, the rabbi did come, and twelve hundred children sat on the floor of the barracks – their execution scheduled for the approaching evening hour. The faces of those children burned with the

fire of self-sacrifice. They were prepared to meet their executioners – but not before hearing one final blast of the shofar.

“Rabbi,” the children implored, “speak to us before blowing the shofar.”

What could the rabbi say? He talked to them about the great martyrs of the Jewish people, about the courage of those who went to their deaths “al Kiddush ha-sheym” – in sanctification of God’s Name. He spoke to them words he would never be able to repeat.

Yet, strangely, the children did not share the rabbi’s sense of tragedy. The oldest of the children got up and spoke:

We children are going to our deaths on our New Year. We are returning our lives to our creator.

We thank the rabbi for risking his life in coming here and giving us a last chance to hear the shofar. And we pray, rabbi, that you survive this horror. Please, tell children all over the world to be strong, and to live their lives boldly, so that our deaths will not be in vain.

As the rabbi blew the shofar, the camp alarm began to wail. And two sounds rose to heaven that day. The life affirming call of the children’s shofar, mingled eerily with the death bells of Auschwitz.

And so it has always been for us Jews, both young and old, who face the limit of our time on earth. We vow to live, whether hours or years, boldly and with honor.

At the end of this Yom Kippur, when the cry of our shofar rises to heaven, we shall not die but, rather, be returned to life. We will be given the gift of days, of months, of years – scrolls waiting to be filled.

Let us vow now, together, to write upon them carefully, thoughtfully, and with boldness, all that we would like to have remembered.