

**Rabbi David M. Frank, Temple Solel, Cardiff, CA      Yom Kippur 5774**

**“Which Way Will I Run?”**

Which way would I run? That was one of the first questions I asked myself as I watched the horror of the Boston Marathon bombing unfold this year. Had I been near the finish line, would I have run toward the victims, or away from the explosions to safety?

It is a question we've probably all asked ourselves in these disturbing times. Would we have run into the twin towers to save life? Would we have been as brave as the teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School? Which way would we run?

Of course, we can never know what we're made of until we're tested. And we certainly hope that we are never put to that kind of test.

Moments after the Boston explosion, Amanda North knew exactly which way to run. Her eardrums shattered by the blast, herself injured and bleeding, she looked and saw Erika Brannock lying on the street with severe damage to her legs. She took her belt and applied it as a tourniquet. She held Erika's hand and said, "My name is Amanda from California, and I'm not going to let you go." Thanks to Amanda's courage and compassion, Erika was the last of the victims to be released from the hospital, after 11 surgeries and 50 days.

What led Amanda to turn toward Erika in that split second? To what can we attribute the bravery of so many like her on that fateful day? What can be said about the incredible calm and self-sacrifice of the teachers and administrators of Sandy Hook who gave their lives protecting innocent children? Were they somehow intrinsically good human beings? Are they in any way different from you or me?

The answer is complicated. Are we basically good, moral creatures is the question humankind has been asking since the Garden of Eden. According to the Bible, eating the forbidden fruit gave us free will to choose between good and evil. The Torah would say, this was precisely the difference between the Tzar-naev brothers, who chose evil and set off the bomb, and heroes like Amanda North.

Science gives us a more biological explanation. Neuroscientists have found that we have what are called, "mirror neurons" in our brains that actually cause us to feel pain when we see other people suffering. When you prick your finger, my mirror neurons fire and cause me to literally, "feel your pain." When I see a

spider crawling up your leg, I get a creepy sensation because my mirror neurons are firing.

So, it could be that empathy is, to some extent, hard-wired in us. But how and even whether we act on these feelings is quite another matter. Because the initial surge of empathy we feel when we see somebody suffering, can be very quickly overruled by our rational faculties. We transition in milliseconds from feeling to thinking, and our reasoning might tell us to flee from danger and let somebody else take care of the victims.

That's why it's so complicated. Because when we find ourselves in situations where our own self-interest or self-preservation is involved, we can be conflicted. Our first instinct might be to rush to support someone in pain or need, but our higher level processing can push us in the opposite direction. So, which do we follow and how do we know whether we would be an Amanda North or not?

This summer in Israel, I again visited Yad V'Shem, Israel's Holocaust museum and memorial. I spent several hours there. Only this time, I never stepped foot inside the building. I was with a group of rabbis who were given a special tour of the outside grounds. I had never quite realized how extensive the outdoors exhibits and memorials are. A statue of Janusz Korczak, who chose to stay with and comfort the children of his orphanage all the way to their deaths and his in Triblinka, rather than accept an offer to be smuggled out of the Warsaw Ghetto and leave the helpless children on their own. Monuments to the Partisan fighters who gave their lives protecting Jews. And the Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations, a vast grove of trees, each one planted in honor of a righteous gentile who saved a Jewish life.

I, for the first time, realized the stark contrast between the inside and outside of Yad V'Shem. The inside of the museum, is devoted to the victims of the Holocaust. But the outside, much more to the heroes, the fighters, the martyrs who sacrificed for others. Of those, the hardest to fathom were the gentiles who hid Jews in their homes, convents, and orphanages – fed them, clothed them, protected them and lied for them at peril of their own lives. That expansive garden of trees is testament to their greatness.

It's an interesting story as to how that garden was planted. It began with a single pathway, called the Avenue of the Righteous. According to Rabbi Harold Schulweis, who has dedicated much of his career to honoring righteous gentiles in the Holocaust, that pathway came into existence at the request of Prime Minister David Ben Gurion during the trial of Adolph Eichmann in 1962. During the trial, Ben Gurion, asked Yad V'Shem to, in his words: "Find twenty-four non-Jews who risked their lives and the lives of their families, to save Jews fleeing from the clutches of Nazi predators. Find them, and plant trees in their honor."

So, on May 1, 1962, the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations was dedicated by Foreign Minister, Golda Meir. In her speech, she said of them: "they rescued not only the lives of Jews, but they saved hope and faith in the human spirit." Just as Ben Gurion had wished, Israel began turning away from the human darkness of Nazi atrocity, and toward the courage, the goodness of those who saved and defended the victims.

And to this day, like the great monuments and trees of Yad V'Shem, their example is a towering inspiration to us of the kind of people we might aspire to be. But, still the question persists, what caused them to run toward instead of away from the victims of the Holocaust – what would we have done in their place?

Many interviews have been conducted with righteous gentiles, and there are several themes that emerge. For most, there was an intrinsic sense of the sanctity of life. Rescuers were driven by their conscience, and said they would have felt ashamed not to act. They saw their actions not as heroic at all, but as a matter of duty, plain and simple. Many expressed a religious or moral commitment to stand up for the helpless and the needy, and they saw the Jews as exactly that – utterly helpless beings dependent on the protection of others. For nearly all of them, what they did was a natural thing, and not to do it would have been unnatural for them.

What I find amazing about this is that even though their actions seemed natural and intuitive to them, they really acted against their own self-interest. By rescuing and sheltering Jews they put themselves at great risk. Even though their mirror neurons may have initially compelled them to acts of empathy, their rational faculties should have cautioned them to stay clear of the Nazi's. But, again, the human brain is not quite so simple, and instead of opting for self-preservation in horrendous and threatening times, righteous gentiles followed their conscience, which may be the highest level of human reasoning – placing right and duty and self-sacrifice above self-preservation! "What I did came naturally; it would have been unnatural not to do it." Perhaps this is the ultimate human paradox and what makes us uniquely human!

In another instance, I read details of this summer's crash of Asiana Flight 214 in San Francisco. Within 90 seconds, 291 passengers and 16 crew members were evacuated. The last to leave the plane was the lead flight attendant who, with a broken tailbone, fought flames and ushered people out and down the emergency slides. When public safety personnel are asked what they might have been thinking about during these kinds of situations, the answer is usually pretty much the same: "my training just kicked in." Leslie Mayo, spokeswoman for the Association of Professional Flight Attendants, said that when we see a flight attendant strapped into the jump seat at takeoff, seemingly lost in thought, he or

she is most likely running through “the 30-second review that’s been drilled into our heads.”

So what do Amanda North, the Sandy Hook teachers, righteous gentiles, and heroic flight attendants all have in common? Not just mirror neurons, not only conscience, but also an automatic sense of duty that leads to action and even self-sacrifice.

And how do we acquire that? How do we become that person who will rush toward the explosion, shelter children from a gunman, hide and feed Jews in our home, stand at the door of a burning airplane? Training! It takes some kind of training to know what to do in an emergency, so that instinct just kicks in, just as it takes moral conditioning to inculcate an unflinching sense of duty toward our fellow human beings.

And that is why we are here today! The book of Life and Death is open before us. The powerful U’netaneh Tokef decrees that, in the coming year, there will be more adversity and even harrowing tragedy. Some will come into this world and some will leave it – this is the decree we mark on Yom Kippur, the decree of our own mortality.

And we ask ourselves, in the face of this awesome human reality, what kind of people shall we be? Our hope, our aspiration resounds in the plaintive cry, *Catveynu b’sefer chayim* – let us be inscribed for Life! Our Kabbalists knew exactly what this meant – not that God should or will decree a good year for us, but that no matter what kind of year we face, we should hold fast to life, lift ourselves up toward the good. This is our training day – our 30-second review – our call to duty!

Being good, being brave, being selfless and giving, requires training. It has to be grooved and made instinctive, so that in a given moment, our reflexes lead us toward duty to others. This is the ultimate purpose of religion – it is the reason we pray, the reason we study Torah, the reason we celebrate Shabbat and holidays – to engrain and review and rehearse the moral training.

Today, we are *b’nai maron* – like sheep passing beneath the staff of a shepherd, like an army mustering before our commander for inspection. Are we ready? Are we trained to face the vicissitudes ahead – to support our comrades, lift up the fallen, to act instinctively with compassion? If not, we confess our sin of weak moral conditioning and we resolve to become better, stronger, and more ready to serve and sacrifice for our families, our communities, our country, our Jewish people here and in Israel, and for the helpless stranger whom we may not even yet know. This is what it means to be a Jew on Yom Kippur. To say,

Hineyni, I am fully present and fully ready to rise to acts of conscience, of duty, of compassion.

In ways large and small, we will be called to serve. So, we must be ready – morally ready to automatically respond. Our mirror neurons, our rational processing, our higher conscience working instinctively and instantaneously to guide us toward righteousness. When we are sealed in the Book of Life, our resolve to be that person is cemented – the person who says: “what I did came naturally.”

I recently read the incredible story of a B-17 bomber that got shot up over Germany during WWII. The crew was badly injured and two engines were out. It was a sitting duck as it limped and lumbered low over a German airfield. A Luftwaffe fighter pilot, who had just returned from a mission in which he shot down 2 other B-17's, scrambled and gave chase. As he got even with the B-17, he could see the immense damage – the crew giving 1<sup>st</sup> aid to the wounded, the nose of the plane blown off. He knew what he had to do. He escorted the B-17 to the North Sea, giving it cover all the way to water's edge and then, with a final salute, sent it on its way back to England.

Years later, the two pilots met each other for the first time. Lt. Stigler, the German pilot, had moved to Canada in 1953, and the American pilot, after an exhaustive search, finally found the man who saved him and his crew. It turned out that Stigler's sense of honor would not allow him to finish off the American bomber. But he knew he could be court-martialed for what he did, so he never spoke of it to anyone. At the same time, the American command classified the event because they did not want our pilots to let their guards down. So the story never became public, but it is true, and from 1990 to 2008, the men became like brothers, and stayed close with one another until they died within months of each other.

What would I do in such a situation? I can't be sure, none of us can be sure until we're tested. But that's why I'm here and you're here today. To try to be that person who acts with honor, who instinctively knows the right thing to do and does it. To be the person who feels the awesome gift and the awesome responsibility of being alive! Who is not changed by evil, who is not made cynical by war, who believes that in any circumstance, I can rise to a higher calling.

Elie Wiesel, in his book “The Open Heart,” wrote of the credo that defines his path. He said: “I belong to a generation that has often felt abandoned by God and betrayed by mankind. And yet, I believe that we must not give up on either. ...I know – I speak from experience – that even in darkness it is possible to create light and encourage compassion. ...Such is the miracle: A tale about despair becomes a tale against despair.”

*Catveynu b'sefer chayim* – inscribe us for life! This is our aspiration, our call today. A call to rise above fear or indifference, and become that person who is ready at any moment to rush toward those who need us – who will hold their hands and say: “I’m not going to let you go!”