

Yom Kippur 5765

There Is No Perfect Word for Perfect

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These hours of Yom Kippur are powerful ones, aren't they? For those who enter these halls, hallowed by tradition and faith, prepared to do the work of atonement, these hours of thoughtful prayer and mediation are a soul-cleansing opportunity to scrutinize our lives in the minutest detail and take a real *Heshbon HaNefesh* - self-inventory. It is a time for us to honestly confess - to ourselves - our shortcomings and failings, our faults and our mistakes. And, with ourselves as judge and jury, this is not an easy task, is it?

How harsh we can be on ourselves! Indeed, we can be cruel in our self-assessment as we measure ourselves against standards by which we would never judge anyone else. Let us be honest, we hope for - we expect - excellence from ourselves, and give little latitude for our missing the mark. We live in a world that maintains incredibly high standards for us in all aspects of our lives. At work we are called upon to perform, and to out-perform others and ourselves as employers ask more from workers with fewer resources and less support.

Did you know that American workers, on average, put in more time at work than our counterparts in any other industrialized country, more than the United Kingdom, France, Australia and even Japan. According to the International Labor Organization, the United States is the only country in the industrialized world where working hours are *increasing*. However, this does not mean that we are leading in productivity. On the contrary, countries with fewer demands upon their workers are meeting and even exceeding American industry in productivity. Thus, even as we exert more effort and more pressure to excel, we do not insure excellence.

Women, especially, feel the pressures imposed by our driven society. Today's woman is expected to be a business executive, ideal mother, housekeeper, chauffeur, helpmeet and attentive partner to her spouse, and still find time for herself. Psychologist Alice Domar at the Mind/Body Medical Institute at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston notes that data clearly show that women are more stressed day to day than men, and it's not, as was once thought, because they ruminate more.

According to her study: "Men worry about three things: their immediate family, their job and money," she says. "Women worry on a daily basis about up to 12 things: family, their friends, their kids' friends, the way the house looks, their weight, the dog, etc."

(Cited in a paper by Judy Foreman, "Women and Stress," myhealthsense.com, 2002).

Students today, face unprecedented competition as they strive to maintain grades, get into a good college, put time into the sports and extra-curricular activities required for college resumes, and still find time to have a social life and develop the inter-personal skills necessary for living a quality life as adults.

So, if you relate to feelings of insecurity or inadequacy because you feel that you just don't measure up to sometimes impossibly high standards, you are in good company.

Our world makes incredible demands upon us, and these demands only seem to increase in our high-powered technology-driven age. In our professional lives and in our personal lives more is demanded of us in less time, and with diminished resources—and excellence is still our standard of measure.

Let's face it, we are expected to be perfect, and the world can be unforgiving when we fall short. Worse, *we* can be very unforgiving of ourselves when we feel that we do not measure up to the stratospheric expectations that we impose upon ourselves.

Does that mean that we should abandon high standards? Of course not, but we should make sure that the high standards that we set are realistic.

Right now, our congregation is in the midst of a search to find my successor. My compliments and gratitude go to Jeff Merkow and Linda Weissberg, the co-chairs and to the committee of dedicated congregants who are part of the Rabbi Search Committee. Over the past several months they have done careful and diligent work looking for just the right rabbi to lead TBS into the future. Now, I know theirs can be a daunting task as everyone has their own idea as to what the perfect TBS rabbi would be like. Recently, I came across something on the internet that may be relevant, it is entitled: The Perfect Rabbi: An Internet Chain Letter.

The results of a computerized survey indicate the perfect Rabbi preaches exactly fifteen minutes. He condemns sins but never upsets anyone. She works from 8:00 AM until midnight and is also a janitor. He makes \$50 a week, wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a good car, and gives about \$50 weekly to the poor. She is 28 years old and has preached 30 years. He has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all of his time with senior citizens. The perfect Rabbi smiles all the time with a straight face because she has a sense of humor that keeps her seriously dedicated to her work. He makes 15 calls daily on congregation families, shut-ins and the hospitalized, and is always in his office when needed.

If your Rabbi does not measure up, simply send this letter to six other synagogues that are tired of their Rabbi, too. Then bundle up your Rabbi and send him to the synagogue on the top of the list. In one week, you will receive 1,643 Rabbis and one of them will be perfect. Have faith in this procedure.

One congregation broke the chain and got its old Rabbi back in less than three weeks.

So you see, perfectionism can have dangerous results!

The truth is that we tend to confuse "perfection" and "excellence." Experts in business tell us that the best run corporations recognize that they are not perfect and do not strive to be. Rather, they are flexible and always looking for opportunities to improve.

What is the difference? While the drive for excellence sets goals that are high and, sometimes, just out of reach to encourage striving, perfectionism reflects the irrational belief that you or your environment must be perfect. Reaching the goal means never making a mistake.

Perfectionism encourages a level of consciousness that keeps you ever vigilant to any deviations from the norm, the guidelines, or the way things are "supposed to be." In other words, perfectionism leads to rigidity, and a moralistic outlook that does not allow for one's humanness or imperfection.

Perfectionists believe that if you are not perfect then you are a loser, and that it is what you achieve rather than who you are defines you. Caught in the grip of their perfectionism, perfectionists often conclude that there is no sense in doing something unless it can be done perfectly; that is, "I don't attempt things that I do not do well." Psychologists tell us that perfectionism often leads to compulsiveness, inflexibility, low self-esteem, guilt, pessimism, and depression.

Rather than being a key to success, perfectionism can lead to stultification, or worse, the inability to act for fear of being anything less than perfect. It may not be an exaggeration to say that we have an obsession with perfection.

And so, we come to this Yom Kippur and what is required of us? This: to be honest in our self-assessment and to admit to our frailties and foibles - to admit that we are not perfect. In the *husu*—the Confession of Sin that we rehearse as the chorus of this day's solemn liturgy, we confess:

*Our God and God of our mothers and fathers, grant that our prayers may reach You. Do not be deaf to our pleas, for we are not so arrogant and stiff-necked as to say before You, Adonai our God and God of all ages, **we are perfect** and have not sinned; rather do we confess: we have gone astray, we have sinned, we have transgressed.*

(Gates of Repentance, p. 324)

Those words should be familiar to us, we read them but a short time ago. But, you know, it really should be pointed out that the English translation is not *a perfect translation* of the Hebrew. In English, the text reads: "*for we are not so arrogant and stiff-necked as to say before You, Adonai our God and God of all ages, **we are perfect** and have not sinned....* However, in Hebrew it does not say, "***we are perfect***," it says: *Tzadikim anahnu v'lo hatanu*, "***we are righteous and have not sinned.***" There is nothing in the Hebrew that confesses to our claim of being perfect. So, what could be the reason for the English translation - or, if you will, the contemporary *American* interpretation?

Could it not be born of our modern world and its expectations? Might not this translation speak to us and challenge us to be *real* and not to expect the impossibility of perfection in ourselves. Because *real confession*, truly honest self-scrutiny can come only when we drop our pretenses and our unreal expectations and see things - see ourselves - as we really are.

Moreover, as I pondered the significance of our *husu* - confession, I discovered something about our Hebrew language - in Hebrew, there is no perfect word for perfect.

My contemplations took me to my English/Hebrew dictionary. In looking up the English word, *perfect*, I came up with no less than *seven* Hebrew roots words...actually, there were more possibilities than that, but after judicial gleaning, I pared the list down to seven different words - none of which precisely captured the nuance and meaning of the English word, *perfect*.

The list contained words that suggested purity, as in ritual purity, or innocence as in a judicial sense. Another common word, *Tam*, can mean pure or innocent, but can also mean naïve.

Other roots words on my list suggested something that was completed or fulfilled something finished or, *perfected*, if you please. Included here is our sacred word *Shalom* from the root *Shaleim*, meaning complete or whole.

Lastly were those words that implied something that is precise or improved upon, suggesting our English word *exactness*.

But, there is no word that comes close to our English word *perfect*.

Perhaps this stems from the philosophical underpinnings of our sacred language in which *only God* can be perfect, and anything in our created world can only be but an approximation of the Divine Perfection. Perfection is not possible, except in the realm of celestial ideal, even for we human beings who are created in the likeness of God, or in the image of God. Though the ideal of Divine Perfection dwells within creation and abides in our human essence - our soul, if you will - we are not intended to be perfect.

Consider this: only when we admit to our imperfection can we change ourselves for the better. And more, by recognizing our fallibility and admitting our shortcomings, we can become free - free to explore our real selves and liberated from the shackles of our dehumanizing standards.

Yes, our Yom Kippur is a call to self-liberation.

That is part of the awesome power of this day, and why it holds such a tremendous hold upon us. We admit that we have "missed the mark," for that is what the word *tyj* means. It comes from the world of archery - if the archer misses the mark, then the arrow is redirected. So, too, with our lives, when we miss the mark we need to make *Teshuvah* - a turning, to redirect ourselves to the right path.

We should be well familiar with this word *Heit*, we recite it many times on this solemn day as we confess the litany:

Al heit sh'hatanuÉ

For the sin that we have committed...

Yom Kippur is about making mistakes and integrating our mistakes into the wholeness of our lives. It is a Jewish formula for success in life.

Where the perfectionist sees mistakes as evidence of unworthiness, our tradition reminds us that our mistakes should be seen as opportunities for growth and learning. Indeed, psychologists find that perfectionists tend to be "all-or-nothing" thinkers. Such thinking leads to procrastination, because a requirement of flawless perfection, in even the smallest tasks, can become overwhelming.

Yom Kippur teaches us not to become complacent with our shortcomings and our failings, but to acknowledge them and to deal with them - neither to ignore or deny them nor to blame them for our lack of success.

In keeping with the life-affirming realism of our Jewish guide to success, the *Pirkei Avot*, the *Ethics of the Sages* from the Talmud quotes Rabbi Tarfon:

Lo aleikha ham'lakhah ligmor, v'lo atah ben horin l'vatel mimenah.

You are not responsible for completing the task, but that does not mean that you are exempt from attempting it either.

The perfectionist gives up before undertaking the task, as perfection is an impossible goal, or the perfectionist won't risk not completing it to absolute satisfaction. While the Jewish guide for success reminds us that life is about taking risks, sometimes falling down, but getting back up again to continue the journey. When something demands our attention, we cannot excuse ourselves by saying, "It is too much for me..." or "I am only one person, what can I do..." ***Lo aleikha ham'lakhah ligmor*** - you may not be able to complete the task, but the challenge remains for you to do what you can. It is this spirit that informs ***Tikkun Olam***, our drive to make this world a better place, no matter how daunting that task may be.

And our world is much in need of our care, concern and action, isn't it? Right now, halfway across the world, the country of Sudan is bleeding. Over 1 1/2 million people have been uprooted from their homes by civil unrest and roving bands of Arab militia waging a guerilla war of rape and pillage causing untold suffering. The Sudanese government is doing little to stop this carnage, and the world remains silent. "What can we do? There is no perfect solution." And so, are we to do nothing...?

In our own country, years of economic uncertainty have left many Americans languishing as the working poor - those who work full time, but still make too little to live on. A recent study by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government concluded that Santa Ana, our own hometown, ranks as the toughest urban center for a working poor family to survive in America. "So what can we do about it? There is no perfect solution." And so, are we to do nothing...?

Lo aleikha ham'lakhah ligmor - we may not be able to complete the task, but that does not mean that we are exempt from it either. As individuals and as a congregation we should be asking ourselves what we could, what we should be doing - what chances we should be taking - to make our community and our world safer and more livable. There may be no perfect answers, we may be just individuals - but we can make a difference, even if we make mistakes and fall down along the way.

And in our personal lives and relationships, we need to take chances as well. We must admit that we are not the perfect spouse, or parent or child. We must be forgiving of ourselves, and each other, so that we can work together to build relationships of meaning and significance.

Psychologist H. Stephen Glenn, director of the national "Developing Capable People Program," and a special consultant to the U.S. House of Representatives Select Subcommittee on Children, Youth and Family notes that:

We hear so much about dysfunctional families. But the "dysfunctional family" is a stereotype. Most families function. They just may not be functioning in all ways according to the ideal of certain best-selling authors. Not all so-called "dysfunctional" families do everything in dysfunctional ways, nor do all so-called "functional" families do everything in healthy ways. Nor does any family affect any two members the same way. For example, three children raised by the same parent(s) may report very different perceptions of that family.

According to Glenn:

We are having the experiences we are having because of the way we are currently responding to issues from our family. What's important about this knowledge is that we can choose to respond to those issues in ways that make us feel good or at peace with ourselves. In other words, if our learned responses to unsettling family issues have not made us feel good in the past, we can learn different responses that will make us feel better in the future.

By freeing ourselves from the paradigm of familial perfection, we can admit our mistakes and shortcomings as spouses, parents and children, and take the chances necessary to affect meaningful change, to make our families and our relationships stronger, happier, and more nurturing.

Being free to take chances - not foolhardy risks, but chances - in order to be better people and to live better lives in a better world, is precisely what Yom Kippur is all about. It is a shofar-call to freedom - real existential freedom. Do you remember the old Janis Joplin song "Freedom is another word for nothing left to lose ..."? Not for us. Our Yom Kippur message is this: "Freedom is another word for everything that is worth taking a chance for..."

Lo aleikha ham'lakhah ligmor - we may not be able to complete the task, but that does not mean that we are exempt from it either. And, though we may make mistakes along the way that should not prevent us from moving forward. Our charge is not to create perfect lives or a perfect world, but to strive for the highest goals and to be the best human beings that we can be.

Wendy has a magnet in the kitchen that reads: "Please God, help me to be the person that my dog thinks that I am." Now, wouldn't that be wonderful? But better, we need to be the kind of person that God wants us to be - not perfect, but resonating with the Divine Perfection in our souls that helps us to rise above our limitations and strive to be more - to strive for excellence rather than perfection.

And so on this Yom Kippur of our liberation, may we be inscribed in the Book of Life with signatures of blessing.

Amen, amen.