

Yom Kippur Morning 5764
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"How To Be A Mensch" - A Guide to Sanctifying Your Life

It is Yom Kippur, that solemn and awesome day, hallowed by tradition and rite. Our liturgy says that this day is (Nora v' Ayom)--"awesome and full of dread"--as we consider our sins and the transgressions that we have committed. By means of fasting and prayer, we seek to open up the hidden recesses of our souls and bare our deeds for our careful consideration and to achieve reconciliation with God and with ourselves.

Let's face it--this is not a happy, joyous service though it is and should be an uplifting one. I often wonder at those of us who experience our Judaism primarily through these sacred but solemn ceremonies. To tell you the truth, were this the only exposure that I had to Judaism, I doubt that I would be a rabbi, or even interested in incorporating Judaism in my life in any significant way.

But, believe me, Judaism is much more than the measured cadences and admonishing litanies that inform this holy day. There is the joy of Shabbat, each and every week, providing us with the sacred opportunity to express our thanks and to share the love of family through joyous song, lively ritual and holy rest, while we make a truce with the competition and struggle of our workaday lives. And, of course, there are the other holy days and celebrations that fill out our Jewish calendar in procession to this most sacred and solemn of days. We Jews are blessed with many opportunities to celebrate and to enjoy life!

So, if Yom Kippur is hardly the most joyous or "fun" Jewish holy day, why is it held in such particular reverence--even by Jews who rarely venture into a synagogue at any other time of the year? What is it about Yom Kippur that holds its grip upon us? *Why* is, or should this be the holiest day of the year?

Is it because we gather here in such large numbers? Certainly, this is the best-attended day in any synagogue anywhere in the Jewish world. And, indeed, our rabbis taught that, (Agra deKallah Duhka)--the benefit of the gathering is the crushing. (Berakhot 6b) In other words, we *like* to be here in this crush of Jewish people, don't we? Especially here, in Orange County, where Jewish life is so, almost surreptitious, it feels good to be together with other Jews, connecting and being connected to our community and our faith--to be together with people who are like you.

This is a very natural desire and one that is fulfilled for many of us today. We enjoy seeing old friends, getting together with family, and enjoying a good meal together after the conclusion of the fast. But, getting together is not the sacred reason for this day, is it?

So, then, perhaps it is the fact that we fast and pray all day long that makes this day so holy? It feels, somehow cleansing to deny our passions and our urges and to suppress our appetites and our desires for a full day, doesn't it? And, after all, it is only for *one day*!

No, it isn't the fasting and self-denial that makes this day such a profoundly sacred one. Our prophet Isaiah taught:

Is this the fast that I have chosen-- that it is a day to afflict the soul?

Is it to bow down your head as a lowly reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes in mourning?

Would you call this a fast one that is acceptable to Adonai?

Of course not, instead, the prophet calls us to righteousness and living with integrity as our true offering to God. Our fasting is a tool to help us go beyond our physical realities, our animal instincts, and our vanities, to see with clear eyes the truths and values that give meaning and significance to our lives. Stripped of our failings and

fears, we stand naked before God and ourselves, as we look into the mirror of our lives and witness the truth about ourselves--that is the great significance of this day.

No, it is neither the gathering nor the fasting, it is not the songs or the prayers we say here that make this day holy. The sanctity of Yom Kippur emanates from its message of renewal and its power to be a catalyst for enormous change in our lives.

The essential message of Yom Kippur is this: "***Your life is a work in progress.***"

And, what is the goal of this life's work? Just this--to be a ***mensch***--to be a human being, the kind of human being that God wants you to be.

Now that we have this insight, the question is, ***what do we do with it?*** The answers to that question abide within this day and reveal its holiness. The message of Yom Kippur inspires us with hope--and it terrifies us when we realize that we have the potential to change the status quo of our lives. In truth, we all want to change our lives in some fashion, don't we? But it is a frightening and daunting challenge, isn't it?

In the nexus between that hope and that terror we find the holiness of this day.

As Jews, we are aided in this challenge by a rich tradition providing us a guide for reaching our potential. The rituals and liturgy of these holy days remind us that just as there is a physical, mundane, imperfect self sitting where you are, there is also the ideal you--the ***mensch*** that is within you and that so often remains hidden deep in your soul.

Our holy days speak to the ***mensch*** within you, and it is the voice of that ***mensch*** that you hear in our prayers today. In truth, that is purpose of all of our prayers, our holy days and our rituals. They remind us to be our ***menschlich***-selves, our humane and holy selves.

And, why do we need such reminders? We need them to make us understand that our lives are holy. Now, how many of us here today ***truly*** feel that your life is holy and of sacred significance?

We need Yom Kippur--as well as our daily sacred rituals--to dramatically and regularly heighten our sacred awareness and awaken the ***mensch*** within us.

In this regard, I find great inspiration in the Torah portions for this Yom Kippur day from our Reform liturgy. In this morning's reading we are brought back to Mount Sinai at the very moment of the Revelation of Torah--not just the Five Books, but all of Jewish knowledge and experience. In an instant, amidst peals of thunder, lightning, smoke and fire from the mountain, the flame of Judaism bursts forth in a sacred covenant--a (Breet)--between God and the Jewish people. And, according to our Torah portion this morning:

You stand here today--all of you--before Adonai your God: your leaders and chieftans, your elders and magistrates, every Israelite.

And then, it continues...God establishes a sacred covenant...

...with the one who is here present today before Adonai our God, and also with the one that is not here today with us...

Our rabbis interpret this to mean that we were ***all there***--present at that supernal moment of Torah Revelation. It was not a vicarious covenant that we have inherited, accepted by our ancestors and foisted upon us. No, we--each of us--stood at Sinai and accepted this sacred pact. The particulars of that ,hrc-covenant are found in the familiar words of the Ten Commandments as a metaphor for the 613 Mitzvot-Commandments of our tradition.

It is the charge and challenge to every generation of Jews to hear anew the word-sounds of Sinai and to renew the covenant within the realities of the times. That is what Reform Judaism is all about.

This theme of ,hrc-covenant plays through this day as, this afternoon, we read the words of the 19th chapter of Leviticus, which our tradition calls, "The Holiness Code." This Holiness Code is a parallel of the Ten Commandments and is--in my opinion--a far more touching enunciation of our essential core values as a people and as individual Jews. Moreover, the Holiness Code is of such *practical* significance, and it so well articulates our Jewish values, that we have included it as a litany--a liturgical reading--as part of our weekly Shabbat morning service in our new Siddur, ouka ,khp,.

Today, I would like to take a look at this Holiness Code, for it reveals itself to be a sensible and sensitive guide for being a *mensch*. It begins:

You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy.

We should aspire to live our lives in *imitatio Dei*--in emulation of the Divine. No, it is not that we should aspire to *be* gods, but, rather, that we strive to bring out our godly qualities. We exist within the universe of God's creation and, as such, there is a spark of the divine within us--it is the *mensch* dwelling in our souls.

Then, verses 2-3 instruct us to revere our parents and to observe our sabbaths--our holy days.

Isn't it interesting that reverence for our parents *precedes* our ritual observances? But, our tradition teaches that reverence for our parents is an expression of our reverence for God. In the Talmud we are taught that, "Great is the honor one owes one's parents--for God raises it even above the honor one owes to God." (Kiddushin 17a)

Today we are faced with a dilemma unique to our generation. With the blessings of God and modern medicine, people live longer, more productive lives than ever before. While 65 was considered advanced old age when Germany's Bismark decreed it to be the age of retirement in the 19th century, today, a person 65 is still within the full vigor of life with a life expectancy of some ten to twenty years ahead of them. That means that we have become the "Sandwich Generation," middle-aged people who are called upon to support--emotionally and, often, financially--our children *and* our parents. And, as our parents become older and frailer, we are called upon to be there for them and with them as they deal with the maladies and problems of old age. When you think about it, we become our parents' parents in many ways. But that's hard for us and for them, isn't it? The fact is we do not always have the resources in funds and time to devote to our parents, do we?

I remember when I was a student working as a rabbinic intern at the Jewish Home and Hospital for the Ageing in the Bronx, New York. During my tenure, there was a strike of the support workers at the facility. A call went out for volunteers to help with the menial but necessary tasks that were required for the up-keep of the residents. Wendy and I volunteered and took time off from school and work to help out. At one point I was called upon to help an elderly man relieve himself. I brought him the plastic urinal and held it in place. As I did so he said with unmitigated glee and appreciation, "Wait until I tell my son what the Rabbi did for me!"

I prayed that he would forget. After all, I was just trying to be a *mensch*--in a trying, and very embarrassing situation. But, where *was* his son? Where were the other children who failed to come around at this time of crisis? I suppose that they were just too busy with their own lives.

We have a challenge as individuals and as a society to see to the various needs of a growing aged population. It will take our spiritual, social, medical, fiscal and political resources to answer this sacred call to revere our parents. This is a particularly poignant issue at this time when government tries to shore up our crumbling Medicare and Social Security systems with diminishing financial resources. "Great is the honor one owes one's parents--for God raises it even above the honor one owes to God.

The Holiness Codes continues in verse 5...

Do not turn to idols or make gods for yourselves: I, Adonai, am your God.

I am sure that none of us has recently purchased a statue of Zeus for worship nor have any of us felt a sudden urge to pray to Baal of the Canaanites. But, if idolatry is the aggrandizing of the ephemeral and the obsession over what is only of apparent value but no intrinsic worth, then we are ***all*** guilty of idolatry. We commit idolatry when we chase after wealth or power, prestige, fame, or just the accumulation of as many toys as we can to show off how successful we are--absent of any concern for improving the world and living as a ***mensch*** in the image of God. So, the Code continues, what does it mean to bring holiness into your life? Verses 9 and 10 tell us...

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of the field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I, Adonai, am your God.

Now, there is a revolutionary idea! What we have, what we work so very hard for--our own wealth and the skill that produced it--is not wholly ours. In fact, because Judaism teaches that ***everything***, ultimately, belongs to God--all that we possess is but on loan to us for our careful and ethical husbandry.

In Judaism, it is no sin to be rich. Wealth is not inherently evil. If you want proof that wealth is a blessing and not a curse, just ask any poor person. Wealth can, and should be, a blessing. But, our Judaism and its Holiness Code, demands of us an ethical accounting as to how we accrued our wealth and what we do with it.

Here, the Holiness Code reminds us of our ethical imperative to share our wealth and to provide for the needy. Our rabbis instructed that a minimum of 5% of all that we have must be dedicated to the community. The ideal was 10%--a tithe--to provide for communal needs. And, this was ***above and beyond*** whatever taxes were imposed by the secular authorities.

Today, Jews, who in the past prided themselves on their per capita generosity, have effectively assimilated into the pecuniary practices of the general populace, giving less than 1% of what we have to charity. Here in Orange County, fewer than 25% of the Jewish community gives to ***any*** Jewish communal organization.

We protest that in giving to others we deny ourselves and our families things that they need for their comfort and security. But, for many of us, an intolerable financial burden means not going on a second family vacation, or not buying that new Mercedes. Is ***this*** what the Holiness Code demands of us?

And, the "Mensch Manual" continues in verses 11 through 14:

You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name, profaning the name of your God: I am Adonai.

You shall not cheat your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning. You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall revere your God: I am Adonai.

Our rabbis translated these verses into an accounting of our business practices. How did we acquire our wealth? Are we honest in business? Do we act deceptively? Do we take unfair advantage of one who is "blind" to the facts--using their lack of information against them?

In other words, do we conduct our professional lives with integrity?

Do we exploit anyone in the process of garnering our wealth?

Do we pay our employees a fair wage?

Do we treat them with dignity and respect?

If we prosper at the expense of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, are we living in the image of God? Are we acting like a Mensch?

In the Talmud (Shabbat 31a) we are taught that when we die and come before the Throne of Judgment--an image running throughout this Yom Kippur day--we will be called upon to make an accounting of our lives. The first question that we will be asked is not, "Have you believed in God," or "Have you prayed and performed ritual acts," but "Have you dealt honorably and faithfully in all your dealings with other people?"

And, moreover, the Holiness Code tells us that to be truly fair and honest we must be impartial, favoring neither the rich and powerful nor the poor and downtrodden. It is justice and fairness, tempered by compassion that must guide us.

Lately, I have been asked to sit on various advisory committees made up of clergy dealing with matters pertaining to labor issues. There are many exploited and underpaid, under-protected laborers in our community. They are the working poor who work long hours and still do not make enough to support themselves and their families in a decent manner.

I am very sympathetic to the cause of social and economic justice, but I do not think that I am very popular on those committees, because I insist that, as clergy, we must ask what is fair and just. We must deal equitably and justly as much with the employers as the employees. When business has stretched as far as it possibly can, while trying to maintain its economic viability, and *still* cannot meet the basic needs of employees, that is when government and the community rightly should step in and help.

The current issue of health coverage is the latest political football. It is but one such issue today which demands a cooperative solution from employers, workers and government, working in concert to find a solution to aid the millions of uninsured and underpaid workers in our community without breaking the back of business. This is just one issue, there are many more. The point is, that the *responsibility* and the *burden* of providing for the welfare of the poor and the stranger, the widow and the orphan must be borne by all of us.

Finally, for now, we look to the last verses of the Holiness Code:

You shall not hate another in your heart. Reprove another, but bear no guilt thereby. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against another.

It is taught that the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem was brought about two thousand years ago by obhjtba--gratuitous animosity. People simply could not get along with each other. There was acrimony and petty hatreds--feuds and philosophical differences became more important than survival. Even then, Jews did not get along and two Jews produced three opinions. But then, as now, it was not a matter of "my opinion is different than yours," no, it was that "your opinion is wrong and that makes *you* an evil person."

Tragically, we see some of that same obhjtba (Seenat Heenam) amongst Jews today when differing opinions, especially about political matters in Israel, produce accusations of disloyalty, fanaticism, treachery and treason. And here at home, especially during this heated political season leading up to our gubernatorial recall election--why do we put up with so much partisan political bickering and acrimonious fighting?

Quite frankly, I am sick and tired of political partisanship taking precedence over the common good. When will we voters demand of our politicians and government representatives a measure of civility and mutual cooperation in their work on *our* behalf? Is it "choosing sides;" is it "liberal" or "conservative" to expect our politicians to see to the well-being of the state even when it requires compromise and cooperation across party lines?

These become religious questions because they are expressions of how we translate our sacred ethics and values into our everyday lives. Wouldn't it be a radical idea for us to choose our next governor based on his or her *menschlichkeit*?

And, how does our Holiness Code conclude?

Love your neighbor as yourself: I am Adonai.

Our rabbis teach us that we must be able to love ourselves before we can truly love others. To achieve this love, we must have self-respect. To love yourself--to respect yourself--I believe that you must pass what I call, the Mirror Test. It is simply this, when you look in the mirror, how do you answer these "Holiness Code" questions?

Is this the kind of person that I would want for a child? Or parent? Or spouse? Or sibling?

Could I depend on this person to be of help and lend a hand in times of difficulty and need?

Is this someone I with whom I would want to do business? Is this person trust-worthy and fair? Would I want to work for this person?

Does this person respect others whose opinions or beliefs or political positions are different than theirs? Could I trust this person to be fair and impartial if they stood in judgment of me?

Our honest response to these questions determine our ability to "love our neighbors as ourselves." The great sage Hillel noted that this is the most important and fundamental teaching in all of the Torah. And then he said, "Now go and study it." Learn what it means to be a Jew and to live as a Jew, and as a **mensch**.

And that, in brief, is our Holiness Code. It demands so much more of us than scrupulous ritual practice or diligent holiday observance. As important as these are, they are but a means to a sacred end--and that goal is this: to be a *mensch*--the kind of human being that God wants you to be. That is why we were created and that is how God uses us to make this world a better place for everyone.

As we leave this sanctuary at the end of this Yom Kippur fast, may each of us work with God in a miracle of self-transformation as we realize our godly potential and acquire the crown of a good name--*mensch*. For as the Teacher, Ecclesiastes taught: "A good name is more precious than the finest perfume."

May the fragrance of our lives sweeten the world, and so may each of us be sealed in the Book of Life with signatures of blessing.