

Striving To Be "Quite a Character"

There were three life-long friends who were having a discussion about life and their mortality over lunch. One of them asked the group:

"What would you like people to say about you at your funeral?"

The first of the friends said, "I would like them to say, 'He was a great humanitarian, who cared about his community.'"

The second answered, "I hope they say, 'She was a great wife and mother, who was an example for her family.'"

The third friend responded, "I would like them to say, 'Look! He's moving!'"

What will people say at our funerals? How will we be remembered? It is a question that I imagine some of us think about on days such as this one.

With Yom Kippur's emphasis on our mortality, on the fragility of life, and the constant reminder during this time of year to strive to live up to our sacred potential, we are left to wonder just how we are doing when it comes to the strength of our character.

A few weeks ago, with the passing of Senator John McCain, much of the media coverage was filled with stories focused on the Senator's character.

While of course many disagreed with Senator McCain's politics, it was striking how many people seemed drawn to, even perhaps hungry for, the idea of celebrating a "hero of character." As Senator Lindsey Graham pointed out in his eulogy: when Fox, CNN, and MSNBC are all saying the

same thing about what an upstanding person of integrity the late Senator was, you know there is truth in the story. Eulogy after eulogy spoke of the Senator's character, of the moral code by which he tried to live his life.

President Bush: *John was, above all, a man with a code... He was honorable, always recognizing that his opponents were still patriots and human beings....He respected the dignity inherent in every life, a dignity that does not stop at borders and cannot be erased by dictators.*

Senator Joe Lieberman:...*Of course John's great strength was his character. He was honest, fair, and civilized. In all the times we were together, I never heard him say a bigoted word about anyone.*

President Obama (responding to the time that McCain came to his defense, when someone questioned his patriotism, even as they were running against each other): *I was grateful, but I wasn't surprised. As Joe Lieberman said, that was John's instinct. I never saw John treat anyone differently because of their race or religion or gender. And I'm certain that in those moments that have been referred to during the campaign, he saw himself as defending America's character, not just mine. For he considered it the imperative of every citizen who loves this country to treat all people fairly.*

And even beyond his colleagues in politics and government, Senator McCain lived a life full of humility and integrity. I read the following story from one of my rabbinic colleagues about the time he ran into the Senator while taking a flight from Dallas to D.C.

I was waiting in Dallas for a connection to DC and the plane was oversold. Three passengers were the last to board, including Sen. McCain and me. The Senator had a middle seat -- not easy for him to access. I heard one flight attendant say to another, "We have one more seat in first class -- we can move someone up." I turned and said quietly, "That's Senator McCain -- maybe you can move him up to first." She thanked me and leaned in and offered him the upgrade. "That's okay," he said. "This is the seat I paid for."¹

Senator McCain was of course, like all of us, not a perfect human being. He too was undoubtedly flawed. But even so, it is not surprising to me that he was remembered, primarily, for his character, for who he was, even more than what he accomplished. While of course eulogies and remembrances of the Senator included mention of his political success, his policy accomplishments, his military service, and his heroic survival of his time as a POW, these accomplishments were overshadowed by descriptions of his admirable character.

After more than fifteen years of officiating at funerals as a rabbi, I have seen this time and again. Very few people are remembered and honored at the time of their deaths for their professional accomplishments or for their material wealth and possessions. Accomplishments and success are often mentioned, but what counts, what is always at the heart of eulogies and remembrances offered by friends, colleagues, and family members, is the

¹ Rabbi Jack Moline, facebook

character of the individual being mourned: kindness, humility, honesty, integrity, love, caring, commitments to family, friends, and faith.

Perhaps we focus on character so much at a funeral because we all have a sense of just how important it is to strive to be an upstanding person in life. Perhaps we home in on character in one of our most fragile, and emotional states, because we all understand just how hard it is to actually live a life that is worthy of being remembered. To live a life that matters, to ourselves, to our world, and to those who will be left behind.

Living a life of character, a life of integrity, a life in which we actively live up to our Jewish designation as sacred beings, made in the image of God and tasked with the responsibility of bringing God's presence into the world through our daily actions -- this is the work of Jewish daily living. It is hard work. It is never ending work. And it is exactly the work that we have been focusing on intensely over the past month and a half as we reach the end of these Days of Awe. Every time we say the confessional, every time we work to repair a relationship, every time we confront those aspects of our own character which we struggle with the most -- our arrogance, our impatience, our selfishness, our pettiness, our propensity to gossip, our quick-tempered nature, our incessant distraction or lack of focus on that which is really important in life, our excessive prioritization on money and the material --

we are taking a step in the right direction. As Jews, we have been conditioned to do this type of close examination and character scrutiny during this time of year. But what about when Yom Kippur is over? What about during the rest of the year? Are we living up to our God-given potential, our best selves, each and every day? And how will the way we live our lives be remembered when we are gone?

In his book The Road to Character, writer David Brooks begins by discussing the late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, a leading Orthodox scholar of the 20th century, who framed the the two accounts of creation in the Book of Genesis, as speaking to two different sides of humanity²: Adam I and Adam II. The way Brooks explains it:

"Adam I is the career-oriented, ambitious side of our nature. Adam I is the external resume Adam. Adam I wants to build, create, produce, and discover things. He wants to have high status and win victories. Adam II is the internal Adam. Adam II wants to embody certain moral qualities. Adam II wants to have a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong- not only to do good, but to be good....

Adam I- the creating, building, and discovering Adam- lives by a straightforward utilitarian logic. It's the logic of economics. Input leads to output. Effort leads to reward. Practice makes perfect. Pursue self interest. Maximize your utility. Impress the world.

Adam II lives by an inverse logic. It's a moral logic, not an economic one. You have to give to receive. You have to surrender to something outside yourself, to gain strength within yourself. You have to conquer your desire to get what you crave. Success leads to the greatest failure- which is pride. Failure leads to the greatest success, which is humility and learning....

² The Lonely Man Of Faith

To nurture your Adam I career, it makes sense to cultivate your strengths. To nurture your Adam II moral core, it is necessary to confront your weaknesses.

Brooks points out the fact that, as a society, we pay a lot of attention to Adam I, to outward measures of success, to growing our careers, our portfolios, our material possessions. But we spent precious little time working to cultivate Adam II, our characters, our inner selves. Precious little time facing our weaknesses, and to trying to live inner lives that are filled with meaning, and sacred purpose.

In truth, working on our character is incredibly difficult. It takes a willingness to face our flaws honestly. It takes a good degree of self-awareness which many of us are lacking. It takes patience, dedication, an openness to critique by friends and family who love us, and a willingness to acknowledge that each of us is a work in progress. The work of nurturing our souls is a lifelong task. As we arrive at this moment of Yom Kippur each year, at the least we should aim to be a bit better than we were last year.

And we should always remember that even if we don't have faith in ourselves when it comes to this difficult work, God has faith in us. From the very beginning of humanity, from the sins of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah's generation which led to God's decision to destroy humanity -- it is clear that to be human is to struggle with who we are, how we act, our

characters. At the same time, God has believed in our potential from the very beginning, even if some of the angels did not think creating humanity was such a good idea.

You see, there is a midrash that discusses an argument that broke out between four angels -- the angels of love, truth, righteousness, and peace -- prior to the creation of human beings. The Angel of Love thought that creating humanity was worth a shot because human beings might act lovingly toward one another. But the Angel of Truth knew that human beings would lie and thought it was a terrible idea. The Angel of Righteousness knew that human beings could act with justice and righteousness towards one another and encouraged God to proceed with this creation, but the Angel of Peace knew that human beings would be prone to fighting and urged God to reconsider. Seeing that the matter was a tie, God took the Angel of Truth and threw him to the ground. God then went ahead and created Adam, holding onto the hope that the optimistic angels of love and righteousness would be right.³

In other words, regardless of whether the Angel of Truth was right, God was willing to take a chance on humanity and create us anyway. God knew that we might lie and fight, but God believed that we also had the ability to love

³ Genesis Rabbah 8:5

and to bring justice into this world. And even after things didn't work out, even after God destroyed the world and started again, God sought out Noah, an individual who was *tzadik b'dorotav*, righteous in his generation, a reminder that God believes in the potential of humanity, and that we, in kind, should believe in ourselves.

God was willing to take a chance on humanity, again and again throughout the Bible. God is, as we say over and over on these High Holidays, *rachum v'chanun, erekh apayim v'rav chesed v'emet*, compassionate and filled with grace, patience, kindness, and truth. We, who are created in God's image, can and should aspire to reflect God's compassion, grace, patience, kindness and truth.

So, practically, how do we do this? How might we begin to work on our character traits on a regular basis? First, we have to remember that this work is constant. The truth is that the High Holidays are sort of like a hard reset of our computers or smart-phones, but for our souls. And yet everyone knows that for our computers or phones to run smoothly, we must upgrade our software to get rid of any bugs on a regular basis. The same is true with our inner lives: regular maintenance is required. A once-a-year hard reset simply doesn't cut it.

Where do we start during the rest of the year, when we are not as focused on reflection and introspection? Is there a secret recipe or formula for improving our character as we walk through daily life?

The short answer? Living a life dedicated to Jewish values, to practicing the mitzvot, and to discovering a sense of God in our world and in our lives is a good place to start.

Yes, this is no small task. Yes, this is a lifelong pursuit. And yes, this takes work. It takes a commitment to study, to learn, to find a community, and to take Jewish living seriously. It takes showing up to synagogue on a regular basis and joining with others who are seeking for a life focused on Adam II, the character-driven existence focused on doing good and being good, and not just Adam I, the external resume building.

I would also suggest a specific type of Jewish study for those who are interested in this topic. It is called Mussar, and is an individual spiritual practice focused on offering concrete suggestions for living a meaningful and ethical life. On a personal note, when I am on Sabbatical next month, I plan to do some studying of Mussar on my own and will hope to bring back some of this wisdom for us to study together as a community in the near future.

While there is no "one" text designed to help us work on our character and nurture our inner life, I will share one with you that is my favorite, and a good place to start. It is an ancient text, but an incredibly wise one, taken from Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of Our Sages:

א אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם.
Ben Zoma taught: Who is wise? One who learns from all people..

איזהו גבור, המכבש את יצרו.
Who is mighty? One who controls his or her impulses....

איזהו עשיר, השמח בחלקו.
Who is rich? One who is happy with his or her portion in life...

איזהו מכבוד, המכבד את חבריו.
Who is honored? One who honors his fellows..

What does it mean to be a person of character? It starts with some of these pieces of wisdom from Ben Zoma. We must have the humility to understand that we actually know very little, and that true wisdom comes from other people who we encounter along the way in life. We must learn how to listen carefully and to learn from one another instead of just continually trying to show others the correctness of our position. We must have the strength to know that real power, real might, comes from confronting our weaknesses, from striving to control our impulses- not banishing them, but learning how to manage them. We must have the insight to understand that wealth has

nothing to do with money and everything to do with perspective. We must remember that our material possessions and the wealth that we amass are wholly insufficient when it comes to measuring our life's worth. Indeed our greatest blessings are those beyond the material -- our health, our family, friends, and our loved ones. And finally, we must remember that true honor is only earned when one treats each and every human being as sacred individuals made in God's image. Any behavior that degrades, demeans, or belittles another human being is dishonorable in the eyes of our tradition.

While this last piece of wisdom is a tall order, it is but a drop in the sea of life lessons Jewish tradition provides concerning the ways in which we might cultivate, nurture, and grow our characters. As Jews this is a part of our sacred mandate. As Jews, we are reminded continually, but especially during the Yamim Noraim, to turn inward, to our deepest selves, in order to continually repair those areas of our soul which are in need of some maintenance.

The book of Deuteronomy charges us: ~~וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע יְהוָה בְּקוֹלְךָ וְיִגְדַּל~~ to do "what is good and right in the eyes of Adonai." Striving to do what is right, what is good, what is ethical, what is upstanding. No one can do this work for us. We must begin with ourselves.

The other day, I finally got around to seeing the documentary about Fred Rogers, entitled: "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" I am sure that many in this room have fond memories of Mr. Rogers' show. A minister and TV personality whose presence compelled all of us to remember both that we were loved, and that we had a responsibility to bring love and kindness into this world, Mr Rogers once said that there were, "three ways to ultimate success: The first way is to be kind. The second way is to be kind. And the third way is to be kind." It is a lesson that many of us seem to have lost in society today. And it is a lesson that is at the core of what it means to be good people. A particularly moving clip in the documentary featured Mr Rogers reminding his audience that:

From the time you were very little, you've had people who have smiled you into smiling, people who have talked you into talking, sung you into singing, loved you into loving. So, on this extra special day, let's take some time to think of those extra special people. Some of them may be right here, some may be far away. Some may even be in heaven. No matter where they are, deep down you know they've always wanted what was best for you. They've always cared about you beyond measure and have encouraged you to be true to the best within you. Let's just take a minute of silence to think about those people now.

On this day of atonement, as we recall those most important to us in our lives, both the living, and those who are not living, let us take a moment to consider this question and ask one more. How are we going to honor these individuals, **by striving to ourselves** be some of those “extra special people,” each and every day? How are we going to honor those individuals who came before us who taught us how to behave like menches, through our behavior, and our interactions, each and every day?

We all know that our society is filled with examples of how not to behave. It seems that we have to look harder than ever to find the Mr. Rogers and John McCains in the world today. And yet, to paraphrase what Mr. Rogers used to say, each of us should remember that we are special- which isn't to say that we are better, but that we are sacred, and that we have a calling to act accordingly in this world. At the end of the day, we cannot control all who act in ways that are immoral and unethical in this world. We can, and should, hold people responsible for inappropriate behavior, but in the end, as I said last night, we must remember that we can only control ourselves.

And so, as you leave here this afternoon, keeping in mind the extreme value that Judaism places on building our inner lives and developing our characters, I would invite you to consider one character trait that you are

struggling with. What might you do to address this challenging part of yourself?

What might you do to live up to your God-given potential, to become that person which God knows that you can become; and that deep down, you know that you can become again?

How do you want to be remembered, and how will you behave to make sure this comes to be?

It is a lifelong pursuit. It is anything but simple. It is humbling, it is frustrating, and it is extremely sacred work. May we go *mechayil l'chayil*, from strength to strength- as we strive to once again return to the work of developing God's most sacred creation- **ourselves**.

Ketivah V'chatimah Tovah- May we be written and sealed in the Book of Life.