

Kol Nidrei Sermon (Yom Kippur Eve) 5779 / 2018

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Walking Humbly With God

Throughout these Days of Awe, I have been teaching about favorite sayings of the Hassidic rebbe Simcha Bunim. On Rosh Hashanah, we focused on the first saying, “For my sake, the world was created.” On Yom Kippur, we turn to the second, “I am dust and ashes.”

Given the themes of mortality that pervade Yom Kippur, Kol Nidrei seems an ideal time explore the concept of humility. The fast, the confessions, the wearing of shrouds (or at least shroudlike white), has been called a rehearsal of death. By the way, rabbis including me have been teaching on that theme long before it appeared in an Oped in the Times this week. But I’d like to add that my teacher Reb Zalman called it, “a non-fatal death” because at the end of the day we shout out one last Shema, as we are bidden to do with our final breaths, and then we hear the call of the shofar like a baby’s cry, calling us to rebirth, a new life in the same incarnation. This wearing down of the ego and contemplation of our own transience is meant to evoke humility.

The prophet Micah taught: “What does God expect of us: only to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.” But what does that mean? Is humility synonymous with lowliness? The age we live in does not prize humility or seek out the hidden saints described in my opening story on Rosh Hashanah. Hubris and narcissism are much more the order of the day. Yet I truly believe that a healthy humility is not only necessary, but even vital to our future in this world we share.

The Jewish idea of humility is not low self-esteem. Golda Meir is said to have told someone off by saying, “Don’t try to be humble; you’re not that great.” As we studied on the second Day of Rosh Hashanah, the saying, “I am but dust and ashes” comes from the episode in Genesis when Avraham had the *hutzpah* to argue with God against the destruction of Sodom and Gemmorah, lest the innocent die with the wicked. He said, “I am but dust and ashes,” just after challenging the ruler of the universe with the words, “Shall not the Judge of all the earthy do justly?” With all due humility, he dared to speak up for what he believed was right. He walked humbly, but he walked with God.

The greatest leader of our people, the outstanding prophet of the ages was Moshe (Moses) our teacher, who is described in the Torah as the “most humble of men.” (Numbers 12:3) We see Moshe’s humility from the start of his career as leader of the Israelites. At the burning bush, Moshe’s humility seemed to be of the low self-confidence variety. He was reluctant to accept God’s call to lead the people to freedom because he claimed that that he was not a good talker due to a speech impediment. God had to order him to get over it and be the leader anyway. It reminds the pep talks that the Dean of my Rabbinic program, Rabbi Marcia Prager, would tell new students who were beginning to lead services and rituals, “Be humble on your own time.” To be truly humble is to answer the call from God to be all that you can be, to assume your measure of greatness. But then wear it with humility.

Moses was quickly pressed into service as leader of the Israelites, where he became the greatest prophet in our history. Yet, all along the path to the promised land, he continually showed an openness to hearing from others, getting their advice, and admitting that he didn’t know

everything. He welcomed advice from his father in law Yitro, deferred to the artist Betzalel in the design of the sanctuary, and several times admitted that he didn't know the answer to a question of Jewish law. When insulted or challenged, he took a humble stance. By the end of his life, Moshe was filled with enough confidence to deliver all the magnificent speeches and song that constitute the book of Deuteronomy.

Ironically, it was then that Moshe had to come to terms with the fact of his mortality and limitations, that the mission to the Promised Land would reach its goal without him. At God's behest, Moses appointed his own successor, Joshua, and told the people to begin to follow him. He then humbly went around to all the tribes and encouraged them to transfer their loyalty to the new, young leader who would take his place. Moshe died after viewing the promised land without being allowed to enter it. A meaningful life means working tirelessly for goals and ideals that have a multigenerational timeline, that we will probably never live to see fulfilled. And that may be the greatest source of humility of all.

Last year and this year, I have been privileged to take part in two fellowships, LEAP and Rabbis Without Borders, both sponsored by Clal, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. Clal is dedicated to fostering a multitude of voices and opinions, Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, president of Clal, wrote a book, *You Don't Have to Be Wrong for Me to Be Right*, and that is his repeated message to us. But in today's world, there is an arrogant tendency to view all our ideological opponents as not only mistaken, but evil. That doesn't mean that we should ignore real evils like racism or terrorism, but it means that the vast majority of challenges in the world are going to require compromise, listening—*Shema Yisrael!*—and making room for others.

At our Rabbis Without Borders Retreat, we took part in a very provocative exercise. First, we all had to name the current issues that are most important to us, that we feel most strongly about. Once they were all written on the board, we were told, “No you have an hour to prepare a presentation in which you argue for the other side of the issue.” The exercise raised a lot of emotions. Rabbis Without Borders director Rabbi

Rebecca Sirbu pointed out that she has been leading it for years, and at first participants found it just that—an exercise. Now many participants become very upset. Just to *imagine* sympathizing with the other side, just to put ourself in their shoes for an hour, feels nothing short of a betrayal. The stakes seem to have become much higher.

Disagreement has become polarization, and not just with people whose politics or religious leanings are very different, but even with those basically on the same side of issues who don't agree 100%. I learned a term, “the narcissism of small differences” that applies when we attack those who are basically in our school of thought, but not ideologically pure enough. Looking at the nasty and smug comments flowing abundantly on Twitter reminds me of a poem by the Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai, “From the place where we are right / Flowers will never grow/ In the spring. The place where we are right/ Is hard and trampled/ Like a yard.” A true humility of honoring and respecting one's opponents is something in short supply today. We saw its value reflected in the many tributes to the late Senator John McCain who

showed a his humanity and humility in respecting political opponents as decent and honorable people who happened to disagree with him.

Hearing all sides of the issue and respecting other opinions is a crucial Jewish value. The Talmud is full of arguments and disagreements, but as my teacher Rabbi Daniel Siegel says, the purpose wasn't to win the argument, but to discern the truth together. In Erubin 13b, we learn that a great rabbi is one who can understand all sides and can articulate the argument for things they disagree with. Furthermore, we are told for three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed on a matter of *halakhah*, Jewish law. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and settled the argument: "Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the halakha, the Jewish law is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel."

"Since both these and those are the words of the living God," our Sages asked, then "why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the halakha established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and

when they taught, they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai.” The law is with them because of their humility and respect for others.

Leaders of all times have led best when their greatness was clothed in humility. As historian Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote about President Abraham Lincoln, “He possessed an uncanny ability to empathize with and think about other people’s point of view. He repaired injured feelings that might have escalated into permanent hostility. He shared credit with ease. He assumed responsibility for the failure of his subordinates. He constantly acknowledged his errors and learned from his mistakes. He refused to be provoked by petty grievances. He never submitted to jealousy or brooded over perceived slights.” This Yom Kippur can we contemplate and strive to emulate just a small measure of the humble qualities of great leaders like Moses and Lincoln?

I started my Rosh Hashanah sermon with a look at the science behind the miracle of your life. I would like to conclude this sermon on humility with one of the most inspiring and humbling reflections that I have read from a scientist.

In 1994, the great Astronomer Carl Sagan wrote about life on earth, in his book *Pale Blue Dot*. The title was inspired by an image taken by Voyager 1 from 4 billion miles away in space. Caught in the center of scattered light rays from the sun, our Earth appears as a tiny pale blue dot. Here is an excerpt from what Carl Sagan wrote about it:

“Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives . . . on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

“The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants

of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

“Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark . . . It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world.”

“To me,” wrote Sagan, “it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.”

As we enter this holiest day of the year, may the examples of our past, the teachings of our sacred texts, and the insights of science remind us the true greatness goes hand in hand with true humility. We are all in this together, so let us love one another, listen to one another, and make space for one another. *G'mar Hatimah Tovah.*