

Sermon: “Can We Be Better?”
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5773
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Even though our daughter Liana is now in the sixth grade, Emily and I still love spending quiet time, lying in bed with her in her room before she goes to sleep. We talk about her day – what is coming up for our family or in school – and sometimes we just read together. When our family arrived in Needham nine years ago, Liana was just turning two. I still cannot believe how quickly time passes. And while our bedtime ritual was a bit different then, in many ways, the spirit is the same.

During one recent end-of-the-day conversation I was reminded of just how old Liana is getting. We had been talking about something related to music and when I mentioned the name of a song she said: “Oh dad...that’s from the 1900’s.” Taken aback, I turned to her and said, “Liana, I’m from the 1900’s.” She’s growing up fast.

For many reasons, Rosh Hashanah is the perfect time to consider growth and change from one year to the next. And as Emily and I look at our eleven year old – no longer the very little girl she once was - we find ourselves thinking about the kind of person that she is becoming...and the kind of person that we hope that she will be.

Several months ago, a colleague recommended an excellent book that I recommend to you as well. It is called Wonder, and was written by a woman by the name of Raquel Jaramillo under the pen-name, R. J. Palacio. So moved was I by the story that Liana and I are now reading it together.

Wonder tells the fictional story of a ten year old boy named August or Auggie Pullman. In most ways, Auggie is an ordinary little boy. He loves riding his bike, Star Wars, playing Xbox. He is sweet, funny, and friendly – and it is easy to fall in love with him. But Auggie, as we quickly learn, is not ordinary. Auggie was born with serious facial anomalies --- with features so severely disfigured that his parents had chosen, up until now, to home school him, rather than subject him to a mainstream school environment. Jaramillo writes much of the book in Auggie’s voice and when he introduces himself to us, he explains simply, “I won’t describe what I look like. Whatever you’re thinking, it’s probably worse.”

Wonder is the story of what happens after Auggie’s parents make the difficult decision to enroll him in school for 5th grade. As Jaramillo explains, her purpose in writing the book was to help readers understand how people who are different experience the world.

In one particularly difficult scene, we follow Auggie on his first day of school as he tries to maneuver the complicated and chaotic social scene of the school cafeteria. Walking into the lunch room, Auggie encounters dozens of children bustling about making their way to different tables – everyone trying to find friends with whom to sit. Though school rules prohibit ‘seat saving,’ as Auggie discovers, kids do it anyway and he is repeatedly told that he can’t sit here or there. Eventually, Auggie decides that the best thing to do is to take a seat at an empty table and eat his lunch by himself.

Auggie shares with heartbreak: “I could tell I was being stared at without even looking up. I knew that people were nudging each other, watching me out of the corners of their eyes. There was a table of girls that I knew were whispering about me because they were talking behind their hands. Their eyes and whispers kept bouncing over to me.”

It’s a scene that we know is played out in school cafeterias and classrooms everywhere. Kids trying to find their place....make their way....find friends. As readers, we are prepared for Auggie to quickly finish eating and head to his next class. And then we hear:

“Hey, is this seat taken?”

Auggie looks up, and a girl he has never seen before is standing across from his table with a lunch tray full of food. In Auggie’s words: “She had long wavy brown hair, and wore a brown T-shirt with a purple peace sign on it.

“Uh, no,” I said.

She put her lunch tray on the table, plopped her backpack on the floor, sat down across from me, and started to eat her lunch.”

“My name is Summer, by the way. What’s yours?”

“August.”

“Cool,” she said.

“Summer!” Another girl came over to the table carrying a tray. “Why are you sitting here? Come back to the table.”

“It was too crowded,” Summer answered her. “Why don’t you come sit here. There’s more room.”

The other girl looked confused for a second. I realized she had been one of the girls I had caught looking at me just a few minutes earlier: hand cupped over her mouth, whispering. I guess Summer had been one of the girls at that table, too.

“Never mind,” said the girl, leaving.

Summer looked at me, shrugged-smiled, and took another bite of her lunch.”

Summer and Auggie spend the entire lunch period talking – a conversation that sparks a friendship that unfolds throughout the book.

Reading this chapter, I couldn’t help but think of my own children...and of how I hope they would respond in a situation like this. Would they be able to step forward? Would they just sit

with their own friends and try to keep to themselves? Would they even notice that there was someone nearby who was on the outside – someone alone and vulnerable?

I then started to think of all of the children in our lives – and of how hard we try to help them grow into young adults and then adults who are compassionate, confident, and kind.

And then I started to think about all of us...about the kind of people that we are in our day-to-day livesand about the kind of people that we that aspire to be.

In Judaism, the greatest heroes of all are not the ones who stand strong with military might – the Judah Maccabees....the Kind Davids. Nor are they the sages and scholars who unlock the meaning of a text of Torah or Talmud. No...the greatest heroes of Jewish life are the ones who live righteously and who are good.

We have many names for them – a clear sign of how highly we regard them and the role that they play: *tzaddik*....*mensch*....*lamed vavnik*....*gutte neshama*. All of these describe a person whose goodness in their words and deeds touches the lives of others.

Each of us knows such people. In fact, Moses is said to have been such a person. According to one legend, before Moses had become the leader to bring the Children of Israel out of Egypt, he was the shepherd of the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro. One day, it happened that one of the sheep ran away. Moses ran after it until it had reached a small, shaded place. There, the lamb came across a pool of water and began to drink. As Moses approached the lamb, he said, “I did not know that you ran away because you were thirsty. You are so exhausted.” He then put the lamb on his shoulders and carried her home. G-d, as it turns out, had been watching this entire scene unfold, and at that moment said: ‘Moses...Since you tend the sheep of human beings with such overwhelming love and compassion, by your life, I swear that you shall be the shepherd of My sheep, the people of Israel.

Several things in the midrash stand out with respect to Moses: His awareness of a single, lost soul. The fact that even for one, Moses was willing to make an effort and to go in pursuit. As well, it is clear that when Moses started out after the lamb, he did not know why she had run. Moses very well could have been furious at having been so inconvenienced – scolding the lamb when he caught her. But he wasn't. Here, Moses was able to ‘get out of his own way,’ as it were – to set aside his own frustration-of-the-moment in order to see what was really happening. The lamb, it turns out, had a good reason for running away. And, in the end, she just needed some understanding and some help.

How many of us need and deserve the same consideration? And how will we respond to such people when the opportunity arises?

A rabbi once shared the following story – the experience, I believe, of either a friend or member of her congregation. It tells of a time when a decision made in the moment made all of the difference:

“Twenty years ago, I drove a cab for a living. When I arrived at 2:30 am, the building was dark

except for a single light in a ground floor window. Under these circumstances, many drivers would just honk once or twice, wait a minute, then drive away.

But I had seen too many impoverished people who depended on taxis as their only means of transportation. Unless a situation smelled of danger, I always went to the door. This passenger might be someone who needs my assistance, I reasoned to myself.

So I walked to the door and knocked. 'Just a minute,' answered a frail, elderly voice. I could hear something being dragged across the floor.

After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 80's stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like someone out of a 1940's movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase. The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years. All the furniture was covered with sheets.

'Would you carry my bag out to the car?' she said. I took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to assist the woman. She took my arm and we walked slowly toward the curb.

She kept thanking me for my kindness.

'It's nothing,' I told her. 'I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated.'

'Oh, you're such a good boy,' she said.

When we got in the cab, she gave me an address, then asked, 'Could you drive through downtown?'

'It's not the shortest way,' I answered quickly.

'Oh, I don't mind,' she said. 'I'm in no hurry. I'm on my way to a hospice.'

I looked in the rear-view mirror. Her eyes were glistening.

'I don't have any family left,' she continued. 'The doctor says I don't have very long.'

I quietly reached over and shut off the meter. 'What route would you like me to take?'

For the next two hours we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newly-weds. She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl.

Sometimes she'd ask me to slow in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing.

As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, ‘I’m tired. Let’s go now.’

We drove in silence to the address she had given me. It was a low building, like a small convalescent home, with a driveway that passed under a portico. Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up. They were solicitous and intent, watching her every move. They must have been expecting her.

I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door.

The woman was already seated in a wheelchair. ‘How much do I owe you?’ she asked, reaching into her purse.

‘Nothing,’ I said.

‘You have to make a living,’ she answered.

‘There are other passengers,’ I responded.

Almost without thinking, I bent and gave her a hug. She held onto me tightly.

‘You gave an old woman a little moment of joy,’ she said.

‘Thank you.’

I squeezed her hand, then walked into the dim morning light.

Behind me, a door shut. It was the sound of a closing of a life.

I didn’t pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly lost in thought. For the rest of that day, I could hardly talk. What if that woman had gotten an angry driver, or one who was in rush – impatient to end his shift and go home? What if I had simply refused to take the run, or had honked once, then driven away?”

The driver concluded his story, saying: “We’re conditioned to think that our lives revolve around the big moments....But some of the truly big moments often catch us unaware....People may not remember exactly what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel.”

While heroes of popular culture are often celebrated for skills and abilities that are extraordinary, in Jewish life, we are taught that all of us have the ability to be a mensch, and that throughout our lives all of us are called upon to grow in our capacity to care....to be patient....to extend ourselves graciously and to use our words and deeds mindfully.

Interestingly, most people know that the word “mensch” is Yiddish, but what fewer people know is its direct translation into English. While a “mensch” is certainly “a good and upright person,” most simply the word “mensch” is translated as: “human being.” And as such, it offers an

exceedingly positive outlook on our capacity as people. Its meaning implies that to become fully human – to become most fully ourselves - is to grow into people whose actions are defined by goodness and giving.

This way of being in life, our tradition teaches, is the very heart of Judaism. One rabbinic text teaches that the Holy One said to Israel: “My children, what do I seek from you? I seek no more than that you have “ahavah” – love for one another – “kavod” – “respect for one another” – and that you have “yira” – “awe and reverence for one another.”

Another rabbinic sage counsels that ‘whoever thinks to him or herself before going to sleep at night, “When I wake up tomorrow I will do good things for so-and-so. That person will ultimately share great joy with the “tzaddikim” – the good people - in the World to Come.

In Judaism, kindness is much more than just a random act.

Being good, however – on a day-to-day basis - while, sounding simple, we know, is far from it. The pressures of life...the pressures of a particular moment...our own ego or selfish desires - all challenge our ability to respond humanely. We don’t have to look far to see it: Newspapers and newscasts are filled with stories of far-reaching scandals and fallen heroes. Closer to home, how often do we see or personally experience someone whose words or deeds diminish the dignity of another? There is gossip, untruths, thoughtless use of words. And, if we are honest, when we look into the mirror - we find that, at times, we too have failed to live up to our own standards of righteous, compassionate living.

Behavioral Scientists have written extensively on our very human propensity to justify or rationalize our own ‘in the moment’ bad behavior – behavior that we are all guilty of at one time or another.

“The other person deserved it.” – We might say.

“I was just tired, so it’s understandable that I did that or said that that. They’ll just have to understand.”

“Well, I was right, wasn’t I?”

The unfortunate by-product of such rationalizations is that, over time, as we become more adept at using them, we become numb to the effects of our actions. And this, in turn, leads us to repeat them. While we are taught in our tradition that “Mitzvah goreret mitzvah” - acts of goodness tend to bring even more acts of goodness, the second half of this teaching rings true as well: “Aveirah goreret Aveirah”.....one misdeed very easily leads to another.

Thankfully, Judaism reaches out to help us. The High Holy Days come as our annual opportunity to reset our moral compass, if you will. They remind us of what is worthy, good and right and they call upon us to apologize to others for any hurt we may have caused.

Also aiding us – on a more day-to-day basis - is the guidance, strength and inspiration that come from living as part of a strong Jewish community.

By sharing our individual lives, and the lives of our families, we become stronger. Together, we listen to and consider the voices of our tradition as they guide us along our way. We pray and we celebrate special times – reminders of what and who are truly important to us. And we hold each other up when we are in need - during illness and during loss. And, as we do all of these things, gradually, we nurture within us – and within our children - a spirit of goodness that enables us to make a difference beyond us.

This Rosh Hashanah, the sound of the shofar invites us to consider who we are...the kind of people that we have been...and how, moving forward, we might grow stronger in our capacity to be compassionate and kind.

If during this election season, the most often asked question has been: “Are we better off than we were four years ago?” For us, our High Holy Days come to ask us more simply: Are we better? “Can we BE better in the coming year?”

May these days of Holiness inspire us to open our eyes and our hearts to one another.
May we discover the joy that comes with *menschlicht* and meaningful living.
And may our lives come to reflect the wisdom of the Prophet Micah – acting justly.....loving mercy....and walking with humility – both with Gd and with one another.

Cain Y'hi Ratzon.....Be this Gd's will. Amen.