

**“Striving for Humility”**  
**Sermon - Yom Kippur 5778**  
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Emily and I can hardly believe that the day is almost here. Like most families in our community, we received Jonah’s Bar Mitzvah date almost three years ago. The time has definitely flown. Over the past few weeks, many have asked how Jonah is doing? I’m happy to report that he is hanging in there. His parents, on the other hand, are admittedly a bit *ferklept*. A couple of weeks ago, Jonah and I went to get him a suit. His first. Definitely a rite of passage. As he stood there in front of the mirror – dressed in a pre-tailored pair of pants and a slightly oversized jacket – I couldn’t help but smile. He looked, at one and the same time, both like the young adult that he is growing into and the child that – for Emily and me - he has always been. In that moment, as well, it also crossed my mind that he looked a lot better in his Bar Mitzvah suit than I did in my 1981 outfit: a powder blue tuxedo – complete with ruffles on the shirt and bow tie.

Watching Jonah step into this experience has been incredible. As well, for me, it has also been a moving reminder of Judaism’s wisdom. The ritual of Bar or Bat Mitzvah, as we know, is more than just a celebration --- though certainly, it is that too. At its essence, Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a time when we invite our children to step forward in a new way. As young adults, they receive Torah – *m’dor l’dor* – from one generation to the next – with love.....They lead a community in prayer....They study, reflect upon, and then teach their Torah-inspired lesson to others.....And they dedicate themselves to an project of Tikkun Olam – helping to heal a broken world. These special Bar Mitzvah inspired connections, as they mature over a lifetime, are intended to help our children develop lives that are spiritually healthy....values guided.....and socially responsible. In a word, one might say that the heart of becoming Bar or Bat Mitzvah is helping our emerging young adults to see and live beyond self.

Indeed, the importance of this life-view....of this understanding....is the reason that our tradition considered humility to be the greatest of all of the character traits. The rabbis say it clearly – and often: Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, a sage from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, taught: “true humility is the highest spiritual level that can be attained.” The Talmud explains that: “one who offers a sacrifice shall be rewarded for that sacrifice. But for the one who offers a sacrifice with a humble spirit, it is as though he has offered all of the sacrifices in the world.” As well, the prophet Isaiah placed these words in God’s mouth: “If the heavens are My home and the earth is My footstool, what house can possibly be built for me. Where is the place that I shall dwell? Indeed, it is upon those who are humble and of repentant hearts.”

Similarly, it is noteworthy that, in the Bible, those who are chosen by God, are often considered worthy specifically because of their modesty. Abraham – in one dialogue with God - describes himself as being merely “*afar v’ay’fer*” - “dust and ashes.” Then there is Saul....In undoubtedly one of the more comical of Biblical scenes... at the time when he is introduced to the entire community by the Prophet Samuel as the first King of Israel – the text says that Saul literally hid amongst a pile of baggage! It is only after God blows his cover – revealing where Saul is hiding - that the new and reluctant king eventually steps forward. And then, of course, most famously,

there is Moses. Called upon to free the Israelites from slavery, Moses's first response to God is simple, yet profound: "*Mi Anochi?*" "Who am I to take on such an important task?" The great medieval commentator Maimonides noted that when it came to Moses's personality traits, we can infer from the Torah story that Moses was powerful...and brave...and learned. Yet, Maimonides points out, for some reason, none of these qualities is specifically mentioned in the text. Only one trait – that Moses was "*anav m'od*" – "very humble" – is explicitly noted – once again lifting up this quality for all to consider.

While there are many different understandings of the nature of humility, in Judaism, it may perhaps best be understood as a reflection of an aspect of the nature of God.

Rabbi Isaac Luria was a mystic who lived in Israel in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. As a result of his *kabbalistic* - mystical reflection, Luria wrote a legend that he believed described how the world's creation took place.

In the beginning – he taught – there was only God. And God inhabited every corner of the universe. At one moment, God made the decision to create a world...a world that would be filled with people and place and life. However, God realized that doing so would not be possible – because God's presence had already filled all existing space and there was no room. And so, Luria continued, God made the decision to prepare for the first creative act. In order that the world could come to be, God withdrew some of Godself into Godself – pulling back a portion of the divine presence in order to allow space within which the world could be created. Luria had a name for this "personal pull back." He called it, in Hebrew: "*Tzim Tzum.*"

This notion of "*tzim tzum*" ...of God stepping back...and stepping away...in many respects speaks to the heart what it means to be humble. For, by God removing Godself a bit from the picture, it meant not only that creation could take place, but it also meant that now, the world would exist somewhat independently of...and separately from God. Indeed, according to our Sages, is because of this divine *tzim tzum*, that people are empowered with free will.

In our lives today, nurturing a spirit of personal humility, in a way, about intentionally pulling back the self...and, in doing so, allowing proper space for others.

Alan Morinis is one of today's foremost teachers of Mussar – a Jewish spiritual practice that helps to foster depth of character. Reflecting upon the meaning of humility, he shares the following: "Next time you sit on a bench, watch how much of it you occupy. There is no need to cringe on the edge, because you are entitled to sit. Yet there is also no justification for sprawling into a space that ought to accommodate someone else.....Or when someone shares a piece of news with you, do you come right back with your own concerns, filling the space they've opened up, or do you make room to follow up what the other person has introduced?"

Morinis continues: 'One student of mine reports on how her insights regarding humility have changed her behavior. 'Now,' she says, 'when friends, family, and associates tell me their troubles, I no longer rush in with my brilliant advice or suggestions as to how to solve their problems. My capacity for self-restraint has developed, and I no longer feel as much need to look smart or wise or good....I'm now willing to take up less space in this domain.'"

Another student shared the following with Morinis: ‘Before (I reflected upon these teachings), whenever I was in a group setting, I always made it a point to add something to the discussion....Now I work hard to remember to take only the space I need...I ask myself, ‘Is the comment I’m about to make absolutely vital to the discussion at hand?’ Frequently, also I make it a point to try to wait longer before giving my view.’

As we know, self-full behavior is not uncommon. Oftentimes, it is a by-product of the culture in which we live. Fast paced, pressure-filled, instant-gratification focused, “I -this” and “I-that” - all combine to move many towards an aggressive pursuit of personal fulfillment – sometimes at the expense of others.

If we engage with others in this way constantly.... day after day, week after week, we run the risk of creating a lifetime of encounters in which we consistently seek elevation of self...gratification of ego. This, we are told by our rabbis, can have a profound impact on the very nature of our soul. The result might best be exemplified in the story of the man who is preparing to receive a prestigious award. While getting dressed for the banquet being held in his honor, the man says to his wife: “Honey, how many great men do you think there really are in the world.” To which, his wife immediately responds: “One less than you do, my dear.”

Mindful of this danger, our tradition calls upon us to pause..... and to mindfully consider the extent to which we might be able to engage more in our own *tzim tzum* - and to focus more intently on the needs of others, rather than our own.

Indeed, to meet someone who has made it a habit of doing this – who has successfully nurtured genuine humility, is to know that you have met someone special.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. Scholar, lecturer, and author....Rabbi Sacks recalled an encounter early in his career that helped to shape his rabbinate and life path. He writes:

“As a young man, full of questions about faith, I travelled (from England) to the United States where, I had heard, there were outstanding rabbis. I met many, but I also had the privilege of meeting the greatest Jewish leader of my generation, the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Heir to the dynastic leadership of a relatively small group of Jewish mystics, he had escaped from Europe to New York during the Second World War and had turned the tattered remnants of his flock into a worldwide movement. Wherever I travelled, I heard tales of his extraordinary leadership, many verging on the miraculous. He was, I was told, one of the outstanding charismatic leaders of our time. I resolved to meet him if I could.

I did, and was utterly surprised. He was certainly not charismatic in any conventional sense. Quiet, self-effacing, understated, one might hardly have noticed him had it not been for the reverence in which he was held by his disciples.

That meeting, though, changed my life. He was a world-famous figure. I was an anonymous student from three thousand miles away. Yet in his presence I seemed to be the most important person in the world. He asked me about myself; he listened carefully; he challenged me to

become a leader, something I had never contemplated before. Quickly it became clear to me that he believed in me more than I believed in myself.

As I left the room, it occurred to me that it had been full of my presence and his absence. Perhaps that is what listening is, considered as a religious act. I then knew that greatness is measured by what we efface ourselves towards. There was no grandeur in his manner; neither was there any false modesty. He was serene, dignified, majestic; a man of transcending humility who gathered you into his embrace and taught you to look up.”

Heroes of humility, of course, are not only found in the religious confines of the saintly and the *tzaddik*. They also live amongst our neighbors.....our families.....our teachers....colleagues....and friends. I am blessed to hear of such souls often when I have the opportunity to meet with families following the loss of a loved one. These are individuals who have helped to change the lives of others for the better through their daily expressions of grace....warmth....and genuine concern.

This past summer, the world of sports experienced the passing of what one columnist described as one of the greatest athletes that you’ve probably never heard of.

Gene Conley was a professional sports rarity: a two sport success story who – during the 1950’s and early 60’s - not only pitched for the Boston Braves and the Red Sox, but he did so while also playing power forward for the Boston Celtics during their dynasty years. As a pitcher, Conley was a three time All Star, who, in the 1955 All Star Game, earned the victory in the 12<sup>th</sup> inning by striking out the side. In Conley’s first season with the Milwaukee Braves, he beat a Brooklyn Dodgers team that featured Jackie Robinson and Pee Wee Reese an unheard of five times. His tremendous size was an asset on the mound. The “Saturday Evening Post,” at one time, reported: Conley’s wingspan was so great that his fastball appeared to come out of third base. As a Celtic, Conley played on the NBA Championship teams alongside Bill Russell, Bob Cousery, Tom Heinsen, and KC Jones. When Russel was out because of injury, it was Conley who was called upon to guard Wilt Chamberlain....and in 1961, Red Auerbach said of Conley: “He’s the most incredible athlete in the country.”

Yet for all of Conley’s professional success, when he died, what people remembered most was about him was who he was as man. Friends and family described him always being down-to-earth...willing to help anyone who needed anything....amicable with the fans.....and having had a great sense of humor.

Tom Herman was a young boy growing up in Milwaukee during the 1950’s at the time when Conley played for the Braves – including the ’55 championship team. Herman recalled that on Saturdays during the winter, he would go down to the Milwaukee Athletic Club to spend time at the gym. Often, when he was there, he would see Conley on the basketball court, standing at one corner, throwing fastballs into an old canvas mat that was hanging in the other corner. Rather than remain intensely focused on his workout, Conley would regularly let Herman stay with him – allow him to fetch balls....talk. As Herman recalled after Conley’s passing: “I was in heaven.”

One time, when Conley was listening to WEEI sports radio, he happened to hear the hosts talking about the time that he had scored 24 points while being guarded by Chamberlain. Conley immediately called in to the show to add to the record, telling the hosts: “Yeah.....but he scored 42 on me!”

Conley’s daughter, however, described him best when she said: “Dad was simple...humble....and he loved his family....He knew that he wasn’t the single name that jumped out when talking about one sport or another, but he was a superstar of a human being....a father....and a mentor to those in hearing distance.”

C.S. Lewis once remarked that “humility is not about thinking less of yourself, it is about thinking about yourself less.” Alan Morinis adds that “being humble doesn’t mean being a nobody, it just means being no more of a somebody than you ought to be.” It is about fostering a healthy perspective on oneself in relationship with the world around us so that one might be able to live with a great measure of gratitude....patience....and understanding.

The qualities, then, of humility are clear....as are the blessings that come with them.

The person who is humble is strong enough in his own self-esteem that he is able to appreciate the gifts of others --- rather than be threatened by them.

The person who is humble is able to see herself as only a small part of a much grander world and community and tradition – and is therefore more open to feelings of heartfelt gratitude and wonder.

The person who is humble is able to be fully present with other people.....and to authentically listen to them....making them feel that, at that moment, they are the most important person to them.

The person who is humble does not define herself by her mistakes. Rather, she is able to see them as part of being human....and an opportunity to learn.

The person who is humble recognizes that he doesn’t need to know everything – and is therefore genuinely open to the ideas of others.

The person who is humble is able to accept constructive criticism – enabling her to become better at home...and work....in her relationships.

The person who is humble does not rush to judgement and is able to assume the best of intentions from others – especially when they do something that may be difficult to understand.

All of this being said, the rabbinic text of Pirkei Avot perhaps offers the best summary when it teaches:

Who is wise?.....The one who learns from each person.  
Who is strong?.....The one who overcomes his inclinations.  
Who is rich?.....The one who is satisfied with his lot.  
Who is honorable?.....The one who brings honor to others.

This Yom Kippur, it is the color white that calls out most meaningfully to us. It recalls the clothing worn by the High Priest in ancient times on this most holy of days. It had been proscribed that on Yom Kippur, the High Priest was not allowed to officiate the Temple service while wearing his usual golden garments – lest his heart fill with pride. Instead, he was commanded to wear something more simple – something that would remind him as well as the people that he served that the quality most essential for repentance....for growth as human beings....is humility. From that – all other qualities will emerge.

So may it be for us as well.

May we, in the year ahead, commit ourselves to nurturing a more humble soul.  
May our humility enable us to be more appreciative of...and present for others.  
And may our openness of heart and mind enable us to live in ways that inspire greater meaning.....and reflect greater grace.

Amen.