

Kol Nidre Sermon
October 1, 2006 – Yom Kippur, 5767

Last year, as I prepared to complete my studies at Hebrew Union College and search for my first rabbinical position, I did a lot of thinking about what congregations are likely to look for in a clergy person. After extensive research, I uncovered the following list of ideals:

1. The perfect Rabbi condemns sin but at the same time never upsets anyone.
2. The perfect Rabbi works on his rabbinical duties from 8am until midnight and is also the synagogue's Chief Financial Officer, social coordinator, interior designer, communications director and when necessary, also serves as the custodial staff.
3. The perfect Rabbi smiles all the time but with a straight face because he has a sense of humor that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work.
4. The perfect Rabbi makes at least a dozen daily visits to congregants in need, and is always in her office when called upon.
5. The perfect Rabbi's sermons last exactly fifteen minutes. Some communities demand that this number be lowered to twelve.

The list goes on, but I'm already down to thirteen and a half minutes, so I'll stop there for now.

While this litany of conflicting expectations for the consummate rabbi may be humorous, it also reveals a truth about striving to be the idealized anything...the perfect professional, the perfect parent, the perfect friend, the perfect student, the perfect son or daughter. All are equally untenable realities, and yet during these High Holy Days our goal is, ostensibly, to work towards such personal ideals. Is our tradition setting us up for failure, or might we be able to distinguish between those realms of life in which perfection is a laudable goal, and those parts of our humanity that only suffer from such lofty expectations?

A quick glance at our Yom Kippur liturgy reveals what our forebears intended us to be working on during these Days of Awe. *Al cheit shechatanu l'faneicha*...the sin that we have committed against you through:

- ...malicious gossip
- ...sexual immorality
- ...narrow-mindedness
- ...fraud and falsehood
- ...hating without cause
- ...arrogance
- ...hypocrisy
- ...exploiting the weak
- ...giving way to our hostile impulses.

To these moral and ethical capacities, Judaism says loudly and clearly, “Go for the gold! Aim for perfection!” There has yet to be a cycle of the Hebrew calendar when Yom Kippur was cancelled because Jews the world over had collectively avoided all of these negative human tendencies in the previous year. The Mishnah quotes Rabbi Tarfon:

לא עָלֶיךָ תְּמַלְאָכָה לְגִמּוּר, וְלֹא אֶתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמְּנָתָה. (Avot 2:17)

To paraphrase his sentiment in the context of this discussion, “It is not incumbent upon you to achieve moral perfection in the year to come, but you’re also not free to stop shooting for that goal.”

And we do try. Each year we renew our commitment to the moral principles that our people hold dear. Yet, while ideal ethical behavior may be our stated, and even our intended objective, few of us demand the perfection in these realms that we insist upon in other walks of life. I have never known a teenager who frantically stayed up all night studying new ways to avoid gossip. I have never encountered an individual who lapses into depression because she has been unable to curb her narrow-mindedness. I read very few news reports about people who have collapsed from the sheer exhaustion of being honest all the time. But there are, indeed, arenas of our lives in which we demand nothing short of excellence from ourselves and from our families.

Perhaps, there is no cohort in which this drive for perfection is more evident than amongst the youth of our community. Every year we see more and more examples of children who feel the pressure of great expectations weighing upon them, even if the Dickens novel doesn't appear on their syllabi. Last August, Time Magazine told the story of a girl named Katie who struggled to make it on her Middle School's cheerleading squad. And I quote, "Katie's push to be perfect has left her with tendonitis in one knee, requiring a brace that she always carries in her backpack. Once, her vision faded to black, smack in the middle of a tricky tumbling run involving a back handspring and back tuck (though she kept going). None of that, however, compares to the sheer terror of getting a D [in one of her classes], which could jeopardize her position on the team." Breanna, another middle-school cheerleader featured in that article, also plays basketball, soccer, softball and runs track during the year.

Please do not misunderstand. There is a great deal of benefit that can come from participating in sports as an adolescent. Many teens gain self-confidence, camaraderie amongst a group of peers, a sense of what it means to work as a team, as well as leadership skills that serve them well in other arenas.

Nevertheless, the ever-increasing degree of competitiveness, both between teams and amongst teammates, only turns up the heat in the pressure cooker of these children's lives. Recently, in New Jersey, a pee-wee Pop Warner football team was nearly disbanded as three of their coaches, and one of the coach's wives, faced disciplinary action for: unsportsmanlike acts, the attempted assault of an opposing coach, on-field profanity and a threat of violence against a representative to the local board of Pop Warner football. One coach is said to have called the opposing players "dirtbags." The "dirtbags" to whom he referred, range in age from nine to eleven years old. Is it any wonder that the extreme competitive push to be number one, to elevate "us" over "them", and later the pressure to be the perfect athlete, sometimes overshadow the potential benefits that children might reap from participating in these games?

Our tradition cautions against elevating oneself to such a state of flawlessness. The Babylonian Talmud wonders aloud, “Why did King Saul’s dynasty not continue beyond him?” R. Judah answers, “Because Saul was above reproach.” (*Yoma* 22b) In other words, he had his faults like everybody else, but he never admitted to any of them. For this reason, the throne was not inherited by his descendants. It would seem that the Pop Warner families in New Jersey were not the first parents to rob the next generation of its day in the sun by refusing to concede to personal fallibility.

While these examples of grade school and middle school pressures are alarming, we know that the drive to perfection only gets more pronounced in high school. I have been privileged to work with Jewish teens for over a decade now, and I hear quite a bit about the stress that accumulates from teachers, guidance counselors, parents, college recruiters, SAT tutors, from peers, and of course, from teens themselves. Pressure not just to get by, but to excel! In order to keep their competitive edge in the race towards the college admissions finish line, many supplement the intensive work of their honors and Advanced Placement classes with myriads of extra-curricular activities...I’ve known some students to juggle as many as eight at a time.

While working on a project for my Education degree last year, I had an opportunity to interview a small focus group of teens about the role that stress plays in their lives. These adolescents hailed from a town not so dissimilar from Needham. Amongst the members of the group, it was clear that the anxiety surrounding their academic and non-academic commitments had begun to take its toll on them physically. Three admitted to getting regular stress headaches. Others said that the pressure in their lives caused stomach problems, teeth grinding at night, sadness, emotional outbursts, panic attacks, and restless sleep which contributed to routine feelings of exhaustion. Though I’ve only been here

for a few months, I suspect that a focus group of our teens would yield similar results.

Such fixation on accomplishment is not the message of our tradition. Learning is highly prized in Judaism, to be sure, but its most revered form is *torah lishma*, learning for its own sake. Not education for the sole purpose of scoring a 2400 on the new SAT's. And while there is certainly nothing wrong with wanting to be a successful member of our society, isn't it possible to achieve that goal without being valedictorian, captain of every team and president of every club?

While Judaism recognizes the exceptional and miraculous in our world, its primary focus is on sanctifying that which is commonplace. We offer blessings for the most mundane daily happenings...waking up, washing our hands, eating some bread. The holiest day in the Hebrew calendar is not the 24-hour period of Yom Kippur which we now enter! The most revered day in the Jewish year is Shabbat, when we take a regular occurrence, the passing of the seventh day of the week, and we imbue it with as much holiness as we can possibly muster. As parents, teachers, and grown-ups who are blessed to interact with the youth of our community, can't we help to celebrate the special holiness that exists in every single child, rather than only recognizing the sacred in the distinctive, the exceptional, the elite?

As adults we not only pass our perfectionism on to children, we share it with one another as well. We feel pressure from peers to excel in our professional lives. We have to provide more service, better service, faster service to those with whom we work or we'll be overtaken by the competition. Many of us have heard that adults today have more leisure time than any previous generation, but we can't actually locate any of it in our Palm Pilots and Blackberries. This fast-paced, must-do, "don't just keep up with the Joneses but leave them in the dust" mentality shifts our perspectives at warp speed.

So too in our parenting. Last year, journalist Anna Quindlen wrote a piece entitled “The Good Enough Mother.” She notes that when she was growing up, most parents passively accepted the fact that nature’s mysteries would determine how their children turned out. This comports with our tradition’s notion of the kids who sit at the *sefer* table. There is a wise one, a trouble-maker, a simple one, and one who’s totally clueless, and they all belong to the same parents! Mom and Dad’s job is to teach each of them in a way that helps that kid to connect into the surrounding world.

Quindlen observes that by the time she became a mother, however, nurture had become the dominant mode for shaping a child’s future. “Don’t be tense while you’re pregnant...you’ll have a tense baby.” Once the child is born, every moment becomes a teachable moment – and every teachable moment missed was the measure of a lousy mom or dad. That’s why Michele and I have been satisfying Mia’s thriving three-week-old intellectual curiosity with a steady stream of Beethoven, Aristotle, Shakespeare, and a healthy dose of Talmudic literature for good measure.

To be serious...for many, this immense pressure to be the ideal parent leads to situations in which the word “stress” is turned from an occasional noun to an omnipresent verb and adverb. I need to be the perfect parent so that you can be the perfect child, and the cycle continues until one becomes a mere extension of the other. In her new book, Queen Bee Moms and Kingpin Dads, Rosalind Wiseman illustrates the countless ways in which fear, anxiety, and social pressure often push parents to insert themselves into children’s lives in disproportionate and inappropriate ways. Being an advocate for a child is one thing...serving as my daughter’s spin doctor, image consultant, and perennial campaign manager is quite another. Wiseman writes, “[W]hile we intellectually know [that] we aren’t our children and [that] their [behavior] does not necessarily define who we are as parents, our actions often contradict our better sense.”¹

¹ p. 15

Last week on *Rosh Hashanah*, as we read the story of the binding of Isaac, so many of us winced at the thought of Abraham sacrificing his dear son, and yet how many children in our society are unwittingly bound upon “the altars of achievement, excellence and being the best?”²

By the way, our teens aren't the only ones whose constant anxiety over achievement comes with a host of health-related problems. The cover story in a recent Newsweek informs us that there is “[m]ounting evidence [which] suggests that chronic emotional states such as stress, anxiety, hostility and depression...are almost as great [a risk to our hearts] as obesity, smoking and hypertension...” It would seem that our efforts to be the consummate professional or the consummate parent might actually consume us along the way. Judaism frowns upon this sort of voluntary martyrdom.

The type of perfectionism I've described does not just create potentially damaging physiological consequences. There are spiritual repercussions as well. Such perfectionism weaves a world in which errors are impermissible and recognizing them, taking responsibility for them, is not only discouraged but impossible. What a foul and stifling environment we create for ourselves, for our family, and for our neighbors when it is unacceptable to admit one's mistakes. How else do we learn? How else can we grow? Such an arrogant mindset is antithetical to the goals of these High Holy Days when we must begin our process of *teshuvah* by identifying the times when we've tried and failed.

In her book, Kitchen Table Wisdom, Doctor Rachel Naomi Remen discusses her own battle with perfectionism over the years. In her home growing up, if she brought home a 98 on a test, her father would invariably ask where the other two points went. Over time, he didn't need to ask any more. She had internalized the message. She writes, “Children can learn early that they are loved for what they do and not simply for who they are...The life of such children can become a

² phrase taken from Rabbi Richard Jacobs' Rosh Hashanah sermon, 5766

constant striving to earn love.” Remen continues, “Few perfectionists can tell the difference between love and approval. Perfectionism is so widespread in this culture that we actually have had to invent another word for love. ‘Unconditional love,’ we say. Yet, all love is unconditional. Anything else is just approval.” She notes that our ultimate goal as human beings is not perfection. Perfection is just an idea. Our true aim is the wholeness that lies beyond perfection. Her thoughts could not be more Jewish.

Hebrew, our people’s ancient language, contains no word for “perfection.” To express this concept, one would most often use the word “*shleimut*”, from the same root as *shalom*, meaning not only peace, but “wholeness.”

On this Yom Kippur, as we strive to develop into the people whom we want to be, let us not attempt to become our perfect selves...for those do not actually exist. Let us instead endeavor to find the path that will lead us and our families to becoming whole selves, loved and sanctified for who we are, not just for what we achieve.

And by the way, this sermon clocked in at a little over 16 minutes.

Hey, nobody’s perfect.