

In 1970 the Israeli composer Arik Einstein penned the words to a song that generations of Reform Jewish youth have sung with abandon. The song - *Ani V'Atah* - conveys idealism and empowerment:

אני ואתה נשנה את העולם *Ani v'tah nishaneh et ha-Olam*

You and I will change the world

אני ואתה ננסה מהתחלה *Ani v'atah ninaseh m'hatchalah*

You and I will try, from the beginning it will be tough.

No matter!

You and I will change the world.

There is something wonderful about the feeling that not only should one engage in repair of our world, but that we can do so.

Over these Days of Awe I have delved into what it means to be good. On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about how a key component of living an ethical life is to not only be aware of the needs in our world, but to take action to make things better. Last night I touched on what defines a righteous Jewish community - how a synagogue at its best gives those who come to it a sense of meaning, purpose and connection.

But goodness is not only about repairing the world - or even forging an ethical and caring community. The foundation for any decent relationship with others has to be in the moral character we develop within ourselves.

The nineteenth century thinker, the Chafetz Chaim, taught that personal ethics should, in fact, be the starting place for all else. "I set out to try to change the world, but I failed. So I decided to scale back my efforts and only try to influence the Jewish community of Poland, but I failed there, too. So I targeted the community in my hometown of Radin, but achieved no greater success. Then I gave up all my effort to changing my own family, and failed at that as well. Finally, I decided to change myself, and that's how I had such an impact on the Jewish world."

I suspect that in some ways it is easier to save the world than it is to save ourselves. You and I can love those in Darfur, but God help a partner who betrays us, a brother or sister or ignores us, a parent who demands too much of us! We get passionate about the shortcomings of politicians, but how many of us really reflect on who we are - and seek ways to be more personally worthy? When the Torah says, "Love your neighbor as yourself", however, it assumes that goodness must begin on the personal level - with our own self and those with whom our lives are intertwined.

Saving the world or saving a community is not enough if we cannot fix our personal relationships and save ourselves.

The Torah we read this morning began with Moses speaking to all the people of Israel in the plural: “You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God.” At the end of his discourse, however, Moses switches to the singular אתה *atah* “You (i.e. as a single person), I set before you this day life and good, death and evil ... love God, walk in God’s ways ...”¹ Communal goodness, therefore, cannot be divorced from who we are as individuals.

Of course, to really reflect on who we are and to seek ways to be more personally worthy is tough. It demands honesty and humility. It means setting aside our ego. But if we do not use Yom Kippur, the day singularly set aside for self-reflection and to ponder our own goodness, when else will we? Today is the day the poet says is “awful and full of dread”, for we face ourselves and see revealed our true character. Though a few minutes is not enough to summarize all that our traditions teach us about developing our personal goodness, let me briefly suggest six ways Judaism directs us to being good.

One: Be sure you have pants with two pockets

The great Chasidic teacher, the Kotzker Rebbe, said that there is a reason our pants have a pocket on each side. In each we should place a note. On one of the slips of paper saying, בשבילי נברא העולם “For my sake was the whole world created.” On the other: אני אפר ועפר “I am but dust and ashes.” The trick in life, taught the Rebbe is to know when to take out which note!

It is important, of course, to have self-respect. In the Talmud the rabbis debated what is the most important commandment. One claimed it is “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Another challenged that first we should know that we are made in “God’s image”, for only then can we learn how unique and special we are. First, love yourself; then you can turn to loving others.

Of course, too great a sense of self-worth can be damaging. I don’t know if you heard about the teacher who wanted to teach the children in our school about self-

¹ Deuteronomy 29:1 ff.

esteem. She said to them, “anyone who feels like you’re dumb, please stand up.” She felt, of course, that no one would get up, so she would make the point that no one is dumb. Just then little Josh stood up and she thought, “Oh, no, what am I going to do now?” So she said to him, “Now, Josh, you don’t really feel like you’re dumb, do you?” “No ma’am, I just hate to see you standing there all by yourself.”

In her book *The Price of Privilege*, psychiatrist Madeline Levine writes about how she saw a growing number of teens in her well-to-do community bored and empty. “Indulged (and) coddled ... my young patients appeared ... deprived of the opportunity to develop an inside.” She, like many others, worry that our societal propensity to continually tell kids that they are “special” is leading to a generation that is narcissistic and overly self-absorbed. Such people, researchers have found, are less capable of sustaining relationships, are more prone to dishonesty and infidelity. Self-worth, without some measure of modesty, is mere *hubris*.

The second pocket, then, is a necessary reminder to live life more humbly. We are not always right. Our opinion is not the only one. We are not the center of the universe. An important part of goodness, then, is learning to have some perspective. And a sense of dignity for oneself must necessarily lead to respect for all others - even the people who drive us crazy.

Two: The devil didn’t make you do it

I would be surprised if anyone under the age of 40 remembers a comedian from the ‘70s named Flip Wilson. His most popular skit was in an alter ego, as a woman named Geraldine. She would engage in behavior that often crossed the line, and explained it away with a line that became well-known at the time: “The devil made me do it.”

While we Jews say we don’t believe in the devil, we are just as good as anyone else in shifting responsibility for our actions to something or someone else. Most people believe Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden because they ate the forbidden fruit. Yet after they eat they are not sent away. God says to Adam, “why did you eat?” What does he do? He points his finger at Eve. And Eve? She just transfers the blame to the snake. Only after their refusal to accept personal responsibility are they sent from the garden. The lesson is clear. The mistakes we

make are compounded by the refusal to accept that we are accountable for what we do ... and refusal to accept what we do as our choice is an obstacle to living ethically.

Of course, there are factors beyond our control that help explain our behavior. How we related to a parent too domineering or emotionally distant can echo in the challenges we face in our present relationships. Childhood fears and hurts play out again and again in adulthood. We are, additionally, genetically hard-wired to seek out advantage for our self. Desire, our rabbis teach, is an outgrowth of the הרע יצר *yetzer ha-ra*, the “animalistic urge” to survive. But to give in to our selfish wants, our lusts of the moment ... that is not fate, but choice.

850 years ago the Rambam taught, “One has a free choice to follow either good ways and to be righteous, or to follow bad ways and be wicked. Thus, the Torah says (that God said when creating us): ‘Behold, this human has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.’”²

All of us make mistakes along the way. We lose our temper, confuse desire for love, forget our priorities, judge others harshly, take friends and family for granted. Blaming others for our transgressions or refusing to see our own role in how a relationship has deteriorated, however, only compounds the underlying problem and blocks us from returning to the path of goodness.

The devil did not make me do it. And until I stop blaming others goodness will elude my grasp.

Three: You don't have time for everything - so make time for what matters

When I add creative prayers, readings and jokes occasionally in services, I hope that they might focus our thoughts on ideas in the prayers traditionally read during the Days of Awe. I like to find new offerings each season, with one exception - the reading on time. That reading does not only feel like an old friend to me, but it is a prayer I personally have struggled with across the years. It speaks of how much we rush after time and seek to gain time. We acquire all kinds of “time saving” devices - computers, Blackberrys, microwaves - to give us more free time, yet find ourselves ever more occupied. We run through life, as the reading says, “after time ... hurried,

² *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Repentance” 5:1

jostled ... and frantic.” The reading reminds us, however, that we do have time. The question is what we do with it and how we fill it up.

A student once asked the great Vilna Gaon where he found the greatest teachings about character improvement. The rabbi pointed across the room, toward his bookshelf. The student said, “But which volume do you mean, Rabbi?” “You don’t understand,” said Rabbi Elijah. “I’m not pointing at the bookshelf - I’m pointing at the clock on the wall above my bookshelf. That’s my greatest teacher.” Rabbi Elijah learned a great moral lesson from the clock, which reminded him with every tick that time is passing.

Because time is so precious, how we use it is probably the best measure of what matters in our life. And if you and I want to be good, we best be judicious with the time we have. Judaism does not, of course, demand a stoic, serious use of all our time. We embrace joy and see pleasurable activities as a critical part of life. A good life is one with balance. Everyone knows about Judaism’s demand that we have a day of rest. But the Torah also expects us to work: “Six days shall you labor.” A portion of our day should be directed towards our physical needs, some part to learning and a some of each day should be directed to giving to others. To paraphrase קהלת *Kohelet* - there is a time for sports and a time for making a living; a time for games and a time for leisure. But a life of true fulfillment also makes time for volunteering and study, contemplation and devotion to the spirit.

Four: Focus on what you do have rather than what you don’t

I heard about a couple who had been married a long time and were celebrating their 60th birthday the same week. All of a sudden an angel appeared and said that as a gift each would be granted a single, special request. The wife said, “My request is that we might travel all over the world.” Suddenly there was a flash and smoke, the women looked down and she was holding tickets for destinations on every continent. The angel then asked the husband for his request. The man, a bit embarrassed said, “My request is to be married to someone 30 years younger”, and poof, when the smoke cleared he was 90 years old.

The desire for more is inherent in us. We are, by nature, physical beings who seek not merely to survive, but thrive. This “animalistic urge” pushes us to do all we can

for ourselves, and is the source for wanting to be successful, procreate and do our best. Like all powerful forces in nature, however, our desires can rage out of control. The Israeli novelist, Amos Oz, describes it in this way: “Temptations generally start from a little patrol to check the terrain, tiny ripples of vague, undefined excitement, and, before you know what it wants of you, you start to feel a gradual glow inside ... (like a) sound deep inside you, coaxing and pleading with you: Come on, why not.”³

The challenge of seeking ever more may, paradoxically, be worse in our age. We have so many choices. Yet the more we have, the more desire whispers in our heart: it is not enough. So we seek to travel to more places, eat ever more novel foods, have more adventures, try out different partners. And still we yearn.

The reason why not to give in to all our desires, of course, is that it leads to our ruin. Overindulgence in food or drink, sex or work, is not only physically detrimental. It diminishes our sense of self-worth. Ungoverned desire can lead us to act in ways that shows little regard for others and harm our most precious relationships. Too great a focus on what we do not have blinds us to the blessings right before our eyes - and to taking for granted those who give us their love.

Judaism does not advocate sublimation or elimination of our longings. We feel what we feel. The mark of goodness, however, is how we learn to master those cravings. On Yom Kippur we avoid bodily pleasures. On the one hand, it teaches that we can control our physical desires. On the other, that this day occurs once a year reminds us that eliminating these desires can not be a goal for every day. The trick is learning how to channel our aspirations for good.

Five: Find good friends

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya taught: “Provide your self a teacher. Acquire a friend.”⁴ Though some see these as two separate acts - finding one person who is a teacher and another who will be a true friend, it may be that the ideal expressed is to find those who can truly be both. There are plenty of people who want to be with us when we are happy or times are good. A real friend is supportive and loving at all times, however, and that does not mean that they will always agree with us. A true

³ Amos Oz, *Panther in the Basement*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (New York, 1995), p. 100

⁴ Pirke Avot 1:6

friend is a moral anchor, keeping us tied to what is right. The person who teaches us what is the correct path and whose advice we can trust - that person truly is our teacher, and such a person is worthy cultivating as a friend. Thus, we read in Proverbs, "Trust the corrections of a friend; kisses of an enemy are lies."⁵

When my children were young I thought that if we just provided certain experiences for them they would move in the direction we wanted. As they became teenagers we realized that much of their character would be determined by the friends they kept. The first year we lived in Port Washington our oldest daughter used to go out regularly with her friends. We liked that she had people to be with, but wondered why she and her friends never came over to our house. "Do you want to know the truth," she asked. "Of course," we answered. "Well," she explained, "The other parents let kids drink, and I know you and mom would not." Personally, I believe that the law restricting drinking to those 21 years of age or older is unjust, but it is the law. So, we said to our daughter, "We have tried to explain what we think is right, but it is illegal, to say nothing of being irresponsible as a parent to allow you to drink. If they won't come here because of this," we finished, "Then these people are not your friends." Thankfully, she soon came to see that, too.

It is no different as we age. If we spend our time with people whose idea of fun is getting "plastered", how can we avoid it? And if the people we socialize with bicker all the time, or are emotionally abusive with their partner or children, does it not corrode our own sense of finding what is virtuous in our loved ones? No wonder, then, that our traditions speak about the importance of living in a community with other people of good repute. While it is not impossible to be good when you are surrounded by people doing the wrong thing, it sure is a lot harder.

As the Psalmist teaches, "Content is the person who has not followed the counsel of the wicked, or taken the path of sinners, or joined the company of scoffers." (Psalm 1)

Six: Be honest to yourself and with others

The traditional blessing said for children on Shabbat is that they be "Like Ephraim and Manasseh ... Like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah." In our home I ask this

⁵ Proverbs 27:6

blessing from God not only for our own children, but if people join us for Shabbat dinner, for the other young people around the table. To the traditional prayer, however, I add one thing - the Hebrew name of the person on whose head I place my hands. And so I add Avigayil, Deena or Natan ... or, if we have guests, Lael, Ya'akov, Shmuel or Shulamit. The reason is that my heartfelt prayer for every young person is that they not only look to others for guidance on how to be good, but to honor the good inherent within themselves.

Honest self-appraisal is at the very heart of Yom Kippur. And if we are sincere it is likely that we will see traits within that we are proud of and others with which we struggle. To be straightforward with yourself means recognizing what brings out your flaws. Only when we openly accept the emotions that grip us, the desires that pull at us, the jealousies that lead us to seek more and more and more can we deal with them. Be honest with yourself ... and face your demons.

God, however, does not demand of us perfection. The matriarchs and patriarchs of our people showed anger and jealousy, they manipulated and hid truths. Yet they were the clay with which God worked. So it is with you and me. As Rabbi Jan Katzew, my friend and a former rabbi in this congregation explains, "A צדיק *tzaddik*, a righteous person, is someone whose merits exceed his or her demands, someone who makes the world measurably better. A צדיק is not holier than thou; a צדיק is thou."⁶

This is worthy advice for we parents and grandparents, as well, who think we know our children or grandchildren better than they know themselves. While we want to protect them from life's hard knocks and failures, are not the obstacles they (and we!) face in life often what build our moral fiber? And how does one learn how to succeed if one is protected from failure, since only by falling do we learn how to rise up? I am not suggesting that we do nothing to help children or young adults, but we have to let them be true to themselves, as well.

As the Kotzker Rebbe taught, "If I spend my life pretending to be someone else, who will be me?"

⁶ *Reform Judaism* (Spring 2006), p. 57

You and I can change the world. We can make this a worthy Jewish community. The first step, however, is that we change ourselves. We can do it by balancing love for ourselves with a proper dose of humility, taking responsibility, being content with the blessings we have, finding good friends and living honestly. Goodness is not in the heavens. It is not far across the sea. It begins, as the Torah teaches, in “our heart to do it.” And from the heart we - and the world entire - might be changed.

May we use this day as a challenge to make every effort to do that in the year that lies before us.