

For the past year and a half, a group of men in the synagogue have been meeting for the sole purpose of getting to know other men better. We tell jokes, eat, drink a little, study sometimes and tell stories. One evening one of the men brought his father, a Holocaust survivor who survived by spending 18 months in the sewers. He and his family lived, in part, because of their ingenuity, strength of will and luck. But they would not have lived long underground without the help of non-Jewish sewer worker, Leopold Socha. He not only kept their secret, but risked his own life to bring food to those who lived as if entombed. When the survivors emerged at the end of the war Socha proudly said to the astonished onlookers: "This is my work ... These are my Jews."¹

Socha was a *גר צדק* a righteous Christian who imperiled his own life to save those he barely knew. What gave him the courage to do such a thing? Why did he act, when so many others, either by acquiescence or active involvement, led six million to their graves or the crematoria? What is it that makes people not only want to be good, but to act in righteous ways?

Early in my rabbinate I met someone who told me that he would never join a synagogue because he did not believe in "organized religion." "I'm Jewish," he said, "but I don't practice. For me the important thing is just to be a good person." I have reflected on that conversation a great deal over the years. Is it not, indeed, enough to just be good? Why be Jewish? And of what use is a synagogue in creating goodness?

Throughout this year the focus of learning in our congregation will address these questions. What, indeed, does it mean to be good? Rare is the person not tempted to do things that he or she knows are bad for them, could hurt others or might even get them into trouble. Yet most people I have met not only want to be good, but believe that they are essentially decent and ethical.

Most of us, however, are complacent in our goodness. And then along come these Days of Awe – the sound of the *shofar* meant to wake us to our true selves, the litany of wrongdoings we utter reminding us of so much we have left undone. Whether you believe God sits in judgment or not, be honest with yourself. Is the world better because

¹ This story is corroborated by *In the Sewers of Lvov*, Robert Marshall (New York, 1990)

you are alive? Is the Jewish community stronger? Is your family? Are you proud of yourself? Are you the woman or man you want to be?

A central theme of this season is that we can bring nearer the ideal. We can be good. But to do it most of us need guidance and support. For us the guide is Torah, the support system the community of faith we seek to create through the synagogue.

There are many philosophical debates about what is good, but in Judaism there are really only two steps to living an ethical life: awareness and action. The former without the latter is mere theory. The latter without the former is foolishness. If you really want to be good, ask yourself these two simple questions: What do I truly see around me? And what am I doing about it? The eleventh century moralist, Bahya ibn Pakuda said, "Our days are like scrolls. We should write on them what we want remembered." What is it that people will be worth remembering of you? Of us?

Step One: Awareness

Have you heard the story of the baseball fan who was hit by a line drive? He was OK, but when asked afterwards what happened he laughed and said, "I wondered why the baseball was getting bigger. Then it hit me." In life, much of what matters is realizing that when things get bigger, it's worth paying attention.

A central lesson of Judaism is to take note, to pay attention. The words שמע ישראל *Sh'ma Yisrael* – said traditionally every day and as the last thing before our death – are usually translated as "Hear, O Israel." The Hebrew is actually much stronger in intent. שמע *Sh'ma* means "pay attention", "take heed" or (to use a more archaic English term) "hearken". Heroic figures in Torah become so, in part, because they are more cognizant of their surroundings. Unlike others, they pay attention, and this openness sets the stage for their spiritual growth.

This summer a number of congregants had the privilege of hearing a lecture by Rabbi Norman Cohen of Hebrew Union College. His remarks focused on the word הניי *hineni*. In Hebrew הנה *hinei* means "here." With the additional suffix הניי literally

translates as “I am here” or “here I am.” But the force of this phrase is not spatial. The intent is rather to convey a sense of emotional or spiritual readiness.

Thus, when God speaks and Abraham says simply *הנני*, it indicates his willingness to do what is asked. There is, however, a deeper sense of awareness alluded to in this passage. Throughout the story of the Binding of Isaac there is a play on the Hebrew words *ראה* “see.” The mountain is called *מוריה* “Moriah.” Abraham tells his son, “God will show you the sheep” (*וירא-לו השה*). And when the angel tells him not to offer up his son we read: *ירא והנה איל* “he looked and behold, there was a ram (ready).”

As Abraham approached the mountain, he saw it from afar. Immediately after he spoke to his servants, telling them to “stay with the ass, while I and the lad (i.e. Isaac) go there.” An early rabbinic re-telling of this passage sees more in this than simple reporting of what happened.

What did Abraham see? He saw a pillar of fire (extending) from earth to heaven. He said to Isaac, “My son, do you see anything?” He answered: “Yes. I see a pillar of fire extending from the earth to the heavens.” Abraham then said to the servants, “Do you see anything on one of these mountains?” They replied to him: “No.” So he said to them: “Stay here with the ass” (Gen. 22:5), implying that just as the ass sees nothing, so are you like asses, who do not see anything (significant).²

Abraham, in the end, renamed the mount *יהוה ירא* the place where “God is seen”, but what the rabbis understood is that what was so obvious to Abraham was completely obscure to others.

How it is possible that something can be so apparent, yet not seen? Actually, it happens all the time. How many of you have ever seen the logo for Federal Express? It is a simple abbreviation of the company name – “FedEx” – in purple and gold. Did you know that hidden in the logo is a subliminal message? In between the letters “e” and “x” of the second word is an arrow. This is not just a coincidence. In 1994, the graphic designer who developed the logo, Lindon Leader, purposely arranged the letters so that an arrow pointing forward would be created by the design. Asked years later about why he did not make the arrow more obvious, Leader explained that the logo works

² *Pirqa de-Rabbi Eliezer* 31

without seeing the symbol, but “if you do see the arrow, or someone points it out to you, you won’t forget it.”³

In life, as in the Torah, *not* seeing something is easy. But once something becomes so obvious that it figuratively hits us over the head, there is no going back. Awareness forces us to take note.

The nineteenth-century poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, wrote a poem that expresses it this way:

Earth’s crammed with heaven
and every bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes -
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.

As a young girl Browning learned Hebrew in order to read the Bible in its original tongue. This poem clearly displays an understanding of the story of Moses at the bush, who took the time to look. “He looked, and behold, the bush burned with fire.” (Exodus 3:2) Could it not simply have said “He looked and the bush burned”? What does the Hebrew *וַיִּבְרָח*, “behold”, add? It teaches that others looked, but only Moses took note. And once he did he could not go back or turn aside. As Browning understands, there is a fire of glory and flames of pain all around us. Most of us, however, are too concerned with our own needs and desires to see. “We sit around ... and pluck blackberries,” taking from the world without being aware of what is taking place.

Awareness means paying attention not only to the light of God’s presence, but to the burning fires of destruction in the world. Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose centennial we commemorate this year, writes: “One may look upon the world with enthusiasm and absorb its wonder and radiant glory; one may also see and be shocked by its ugliness and evil.”⁴ Rabbi Rolando Matalon writes that “Heschel challenges us to see both of these things in the world: as we travel from place to place in our daily lives, we ought to see beauty and delight, as well as violence and human degradation.”

When Abraham and Moses look from afar, they could not have known if what they saw represented danger or delight. Their greatness is they did not avert their eyes from

³ <http://www.thesneeze.com/mt-archives/000273.php>

⁴ *A Passion for Truth*, Abraham Joshua Heschel, p. 34

whatever truth was revealed. To be faithful, they taught, we must see the world's blessings and its curse. The prophet Isaiah heard the angels proclaim: "The whole earth is full of God's glory" (Isaiah 6:3); Job, however, maintained that "the earth is given to the power of the wicked" (Job 9:24)."

Yet are we not like Abraham's servants or so many of Moses' contemporaries, who look but do not see? Whenever I speak to young people about the Holocaust some sensitive student invariably asks, "How could people let this happen? Why did so few seemed to know of or care about the slaughter of the Jewish people?"

In the Second World War most truly could claim that they had no idea of the evil being perpetrated by the Nazis. We, who live in an age of YouTube and internet, have no such luxury of moral amnesia. You and I know what is happening in Darfur. We are well-informed of the intolerance of Islamic radicalism, of the anti-Semitic hate spewing from Iran. There is no escape from the knowledge that the climate is changing faster in our lifetime than at any time in recorded history. We read daily of a Presidential administration that places hard-fought for liberties at risk all in the name of security. We are more than well aware of global inequity, intolerance and the self-indulgence tyranny.

To see, however, is not enough. Goodness depends on awareness, but it only grows through what we do with that of which we are aware. Thus are we led to the second key component of a faith-based ethics – to take action.

Step Two: Action

In an early work on morality *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Eleazar teaches, "To what do we compare a person whose wisdom exceeds his or her deeds? To a tree with plentiful leaves and minimal roots, which is uprooted and turned on its head when the wind comes." Awareness and knowledge alone are inadequate responses to life's challenges. We are defined not by what we intend, but by what we do.

The most important message of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur is that we are free. Life brings much beyond our control, but our destiny is in our hands. In the *u'nitaneh tokef* we say "who shall live and who shall die." Yet even God's decisions are altered by "repentance, prayer and righteous giving." You and I are not

helpless. These days remind us that we have the power to change ourselves and to affect the world around us. In his masterful work on the Days of Awe, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik wrote that “Man is born like an object, dies like an object, but possesses the ability to live like a subject, like a creator, an innovator, who can impress his own individual seal upon his life and can extricate himself from a mechanical type of existence and enter into a creative, active mode of being.”⁵

The need to transform faithful awareness into action is so essential and sounds so simple, it seems to need no rabbi’s advice or encouragement. Yet taking action on what we want to do, on what we become aware that we should do, is not easy. So often we intend to act, but we do not. Yet acting upon our awareness is the crucial component of faith. Cliché it may be, but “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

In 1967, speaking against the Vietnam War, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel told the story of a young Polish Hassidic boy who cried when he read the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. “Why are you crying?” said his teacher, “You know that the angel saved Isaac's life.” “But what if the angel had come a moment too late?” said the boy. Heschel concluded, “Angels are never late. But sometimes human beings are.”

To simply speak of the wrongs that we know need to be righted is insufficient, for our children and grandchildren will look back and wonder, “How could you have not done something?” How will we face them for our sin of apathy, our transgression of inaction? The only escape from the strait-jacket of indolence is to act. Faithful awareness leads us inescapably into an engagement with the world.

Former president Bill Clinton has just published a book called *Giving: How Each of Us Can Change the World*. In it he tells stories of hundreds of people, businesses and organizations that are making a difference. But we don’t need his book or his reminders. All we need to do is look around in this community to see that there are givers who walk amongst us.

There is a young man in our congregation who went on our congregational bus a year and a half ago to the Washington, DC rally for Darfur. So roused was he to help that he raised money babysitting in order to buy t-shirts to make people aware of the

⁵ *Kol Dodi Dofek* (“The Voice of My Beloved Impels”)

crisis. He gave all the shirts away for free because his goal was to raise consciousness about the crisis. Additional funds he raised by working he gave to support refugees.

A number of years ago, a young woman in our community had a tumor behind her eye. The best prognosis, she was told, was blindness. Despite the predictions, she survived and regained some sight. What has she done with the gift of her life? She gives back. This summer she and her family opened their home to support a group that rescues abandoned babies. To date over 600 babies have been saved.

Want to know one of my heroes in this congregation? It's a young man about to become Bar Mitzvah. Others say he is challenged by his disability, but what I see is a person capable of raising others spirits with his warmth, good humor and strength of character. More than that, he gives to others – getting a group of friends to join him skiing to raise funds to help other young people that they are more than capable, whatever others may say.

Just a few miles from here some 300 men, women and children are fed a hot, nutritious lunch with warm smiles every day. Once a month someone in this community makes it his task to procure the food, find the servers and then use his lunch hour to feed this massive number of guests. He does it uncomplaining and with modesty.

A year and a half ago two High School students were inspired by a speaker from a group called "Rock and Wrap It Up" to start collecting food from Schreiber High School and bring it to local food banks. They pushed the clergy here to remind those who have B'nai Mitzvah parties and wedding celebrations to allow their leftover food to be put to good purpose rather than just be thrown out.

If you ever want to be inspired, go to the top of the stairs near the cantor's office to see the bulletin board listing the "Mitzvah Projects" of our congregation's B'nai Mitzvah. They restore my faith continually in their willingness to give – helping out at soup kitchens, playing music at hospitals and nursing homes, giving their hair for those who have lost their own because of illness, raising money for a program in Israel to train dogs who sniff out explosives. The children and families in this community reach out lovingly to those with autism and cancer, the lonely, bereft and needy. And they do so routinely

with humility, grace and generosity. You can read former President Clinton's book if you want, but if you really want to see good people, just look around.

At the end of every worship service we say the prayer עלינו *Aleinu*. Immediately after speaking about the importance of acknowledging God's Presence, we express the hope לתקן עולם *l'taken et ha-Olam*, "to fix the world." We are not, however, required to fix the whole world. What we can do is join the grand enterprise of Jewish life, which is to not only see the world's pain, but realize that we have the God-given power to transform tears of sorrow into cries of joy.

So what holds us back? For some it is timidity, for others selfishness. I suspect, however, that what keeps most of us from goodness is a lack of faith in our own capacity. We see the fires burning and we wonder, "What can I do?" But Rosh Hashanah says to you that you are greater, more powerful and more capable than you might imagine. On Yom Kippur we will read in the Torah "The thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart to observe it" (Deuteronomy 30:14). The Hebrew for "observe," לעשות *laasot*, also means "to do." The yardstick of goodness, then, is not what we hope to accomplish. It is what we do in our life that is the measure of true repentance.

David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, once said, "The Jew who does not believe in miracles is not a realist." Miracles, he understood, do happen. All that is needed is someone to act to make them real. That someone can be you.

Let me conclude with a story that is told of an evil king who wanted to rid his land of all the Jews. Approaching the community's rabbi, the king said that if he answered a riddle correctly the Jews could stay. If not, they would be exiled. The esteemed rabbi had little choice, so he agreed. Standing before all the land's inhabitants, the king lifted up a small bird, then hid it behind his back. With a sneer, the monarch asked the sage, "Is the bird I hold alive or dead?" If the rabbi were to answer "dead", he knew the king would let it fly away free. The Jews would be forced from their homes. But if he replied that the bird was alive the king would squeeze the life from the bird. The Jews

hopes would be crushed just the same. So, the rabbi answered, "Your Majesty, the answer to your question lies in your hands."

So it is with us. We choose our fate, just as we choose what we see. Do you not see the bush aflame? And seeing the glory and pain, will you take heed, or pluck the blueberries in order to take care of yourself? Open your heart to God's bounty and the tortured yearnings of those who need your love. Become aware. Act. You hold the world's destiny – and thus your own – in your hands.