

When the Rabbi Comes Knocking, What Will You Tell Him?

Yom Kippur Morning, 5776

Community Synagogue of Rye

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My Dear Friends.

I want to begin with a story.

Two brothers, Reuben and Simeon, worked together in a small town. Over the years, they earned a well-deserved reputation as two of the most callous, corrupt, coldblooded businessmen ever. They drove other stores out of business; they monopolized commerce; they abused their employees; they deceived their customers. They used every trick in the book, and a few they wrote on their own, to enrich themselves while despoiling others. Throughout the city, people despised them. Their reign of terror lasted many years.

Eventually, as it happens, Simeon died. Reuben went to talk to the rabbi about the funeral. He walked into the rabbi's office and declared: "Rabbi, I am prepared to make a gift of five hundred thousand dollars to this synagogue. But there is one condition. At my brother's funeral tomorrow, you have to say that he was a mensch." Regretfully, the rabbi replied, "I'm sorry, but there is no way I can do that. His actions hurt too many people. The whole congregation will know that I am lying, I cannot compromise my integrity that way."

Reuben responded, "I will make it a million dollars." The rabbi hesitated for a moment, but then he shook his head again and answered, "I can't do it. Everyone in town knows how he lived his life. I can't say something that is so blatantly untrue, even for a million dollars."

Reuben retorted, "Two million dollars, Rabbi. I will give you a check right now for two million dollars, if you promise to say these exact words: 'He was a mensch.'" The rabbi caught his breath. Two million dollars was a lot of money. The things the synagogue could do with two million dollars—the people it could help, the lives it could inspire, the gaps it could bridge. Finally, the rabbi agreed. He took the check, immediately deposited it, and wrote the eulogy.

The next day, the funeral was crowded with people curious to hear how the rabbi would eulogize such a man. They came, more for their own curiosity than to mourn the deceased. At the appropriate time, the rabbi began to speak. "We all know what kind of a man Simeon was. He lied. He cheated. He swindled. He had no sense of right and wrong. He ruined people's lives without a second thought. And yet," the rabbi concluded, "compared to his brother, he was a mensch!"

This is my 13th year with all of you. It is my 18th in the rabbinate. I have given dozens of Eulogies. Some have written themselves. Others have proven more challenging. Each was unique and special and humbling. Of all the things we clergy do, writing a eulogy is an awesome and terrifying task. To be invited into your home to speak about a recently deceased relative is something I take with utter seriousness. It is a sacred privilege. To encapsulate a life, to show that it was filled with meaning... How does one do that? How do you measure a life?

When I come to do what is professionally referred to as an "intake," I say, "paint me a picture about your loved one." People speak about biography but I listen more to the adjectives and especially to the anecdotes. Then I ask a question that usually stops people in their tracks.

“If so and so were here right now, how do you think they would want to be remembered?”
“Oooh,” they say, “That’s a tough question.”

And so, on this day, when we confront the powerful words, “who shall live and who shall die;” that is a question worth pondering. When the rabbi or cantor comes knocking, what do we want our loved ones to say about us? How do you want to be remembered?

This past Spring, New York Times Columnist David Brooks released a book entitled, The Road to Character. Some of you may have already read it. Our board of trustees is reading his book this year. He asks a simple question: Are you living your resume or are you living your eulogy?

The eulogy is the foundational document of our legacy, of how people remember us, of how we will live on in the minds and hearts of others. And it is very telling what you don't hear in eulogies. You almost never hear things like: "Of course his crowning achievement was when he made senior vice president." Or: "What everybody loved most about her was how she ate lunch at her desk. Every day." Or: "He was proud that he never made it to one of his kid's Little League games because he always wanted to go over those sales figures one more time." Or: "She didn't have any real friends, but she had 600 Facebook friends, and she dealt with every email in her inbox every night." Or: "But he will live on, not in our hearts or memories, because we barely knew him, but in his PowerPoint slides, which were always meticulously prepared."

No matter how much a person spends of his or her life burning the candle at both ends--chasing a material definition of success and too often missing out on real life--the eulogy is always about the other stuff: what they gave, how they connected, how much they meant to the lives of the real people around them, small kindnesses, lifelong passions and what made them laugh.

On this day where we ask who shall live and who shall die, maybe its time to adjust what we want to be remembered for and what constitutes real success in life.

In 1965, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the leading orthodox rabbis of the 20th century wrote a book entitled “Lonely Man of Faith.” Looking deeply into the first chapters of Genesis, Soltoveitchik noted that the two accounts of creation found there, represent the two core aspects of our nature. He called them Adam I and Adam II. And so I am not accused of mysogeny, for Soltoveitchik, as for the Biblical author, Adam, as it does today, means human being.

In Genesis Ch. 1, Adam I is given the mandate to subdue nature and master the cosmos. Adam I is majestic man who approaches the world in functional, pragmatic, even utilitarian terms. Simply put, Adam I is the career-oriented, ambitious side of our nature. Adam I is resume virtues; the aspect of our self that wants to build, create, produce, and discover.

By contrast, Adam II, whom we meet in the second chapter of Genesis represents the person searching for meaning. Adam II is introduced by the words, "It is not good for man to be alone." He is constantly seeking to be in relationship. Adam II does not subdue the garden, but rather tills it and preserves it. Adam II has a calling, a sacred purpose; she experiences life as a moral drama, giving to receive, surrendering to gain inner-strength, living with the knowledge that failure, while painful, leads to learning and the ultimate goal, humility and a connection to God. Adam II represents, you guessed it, eulogy virtues.

Solovetitchik was clear that the goal was not to get from Adam I to Adam II but rather, to find a degree of equilibrium between these two natures. The challenge, as David Brooks points out, is that, “We now live in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career but leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life.” The question before us, especially on this day, is to figure out how to strike a better balance, to bring up some of our Adam II qualities if they are otherwise lacking.

Every year, researchers from UCLA survey a nationwide sample of college freshmen to gauge what they want out of life. In 1966, 80 percent of freshmen said that they were strongly motivated to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. Today, less than half of them say that. In 1966, 42 percent said that personal wealth was an important goal. By 1990, that number had climbed to 74 percent.

As wealth became a priority, empathy suffered. Let me rephrase that, ‘as wealth becomes a priority, empathy suffers.’ A University of Michigan study found that today’s college students score 40 percent lower than their predecessors in the 1970s in their ability to understand what another person is feeling.

This shift to focus on the individual, to Adam I tendencies, can be confirmed through a simple internet search. Using Google ngrams, you type in a word and see, over the years, which words have been used more or less frequently. Over the past few decades there has been a sharp rise in the usage of words like, “self” and “personalized,” and sharp declines in words like “community,” “share,” and “united.” Usage of the word “gratitude” is down 49 percent, “Humbleness” is down 52 percent and “kindness” is down 56 percent. (Brooks p. 258). If this was your stock portfolio what would your advisor tell you? If we don’t start investing a little more time on our character, what will our family members have to say about us?

Last spring I had coffee with a man who was having a hard time finding a job. Externally everything looked great. He had a business degree from an Ivy League school, lives in a large home, is happily married with healthy kids but he couldn’t land a new job. He had left his former job after asking himself an Adam II question, “is this all there is?” but hadn’t found the next thing. He asked me seemingly religious questions like, “what did I do that God would punish me so?” or “doesn’t God listen to my prayers?” But these aren’t really religious questions, they are utilitarian ones. The questions propose a line of reasoning that goes, “if I pray correctly, if I do the right things, then God will materially reward me.” I told him that God doesn’t work that way. God isn’t a treat dispenser. I told him that the question he should be asking is, “now that this has happened, how am I going to respond?” That’s a religious question.

Then I asked, “tell me about a time in your life when you failed.” He thought for a while and responded, “I haven’t. I have never failed at anything.” My heart broke for him. Not having failed was admitting that he hadn’t learned, that he didn’t know that after you fall down you can usually get back up. It’s what author Wendy Mogul would call “The Blessing of a B Minus”

The question before us today, as we contemplate the fragility of life and hopefully not, the merits of the next business deal, is how? HOW might we restore balance between Adam I and Adam II? What might we do to build up our souls, our inner character? How might we begin to live a fulfilled life so that when the rabbi or cantor comes knocking, our family will have something meaningful to say?

The first step to lifting up our Adam II qualities is to grow in humility, to remind ourselves that we are not masters of the universe, rather we are caretakers. Since humility is something brought about through intentional practice that slowly changes your outlook and how you respond, allow me to suggest three things that, if done overtime, will hopefully increase your humility quotient and will put you on the road to character.

First. Figure out what you believe.

In his wildly popular Ted Talk, author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek sums up his theory with the sentence, “people don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it.” He speaks of the limbic brain and the neocortex and how we are biologically hardwired to be attracted more to dreams and visions than to facts. He points out how Martin Luther King Jr. didn’t stand on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and say, ‘I have a plan,’ he said, ‘I have a dream.’ That dream came from a core story that was King’s alone yet was one that was shared by so many; a dream that formed a belief that inspired millions.

What is your story? What events in your life shaped your core values? When was your belief formed or tested or changed. Your story need not be heart-warming or gut-wrenching—it can even be funny—but it should be real. Real, because that story should inform core values through which you make daily decisions.

When I was almost seven my parents separated. 40 years later I can still tell you everything that happened from the moment my mom and dad sat me and Naomi down on our living room couch until I went to bed. I can still feel the tears in eyes as I rode around Stanley Park with my dad on my bike. I can still smell the cookies that my sister baked with my mom that afternoon. And I still feel the embrace: of parents who worked extremely hard to ensure that our lives were disrupted as little as possible, of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins who surrounded me and Naomi with love. From that I’ve formed a core belief that relationships matter, that connections between people and things are at the heart of who we are and what we are called to do.

As I’ve studied scientific theories of creation which suggest that we are all made of stardust, and Hasidic literature envisioning God’s world as one interconnected entity, this significance of connections has strengthened. Add to that the fact that we are probably one of, if not the only part of creation conscious of this reality and a core belief emerges: everything is connected and we are responsible. This belief guides me. It helps me to make my daily decisions. It makes me feel responsible to our planet and to other creatures. It causes me to cry inside and to speak out for justice where I hear that our planet is being ravaged, when I hear that 60 million people are displaced from their homes or that people are persecuted because of their race. That’s my belief. It guides my rabbinate. It makes me consider the type of caring community we are on the road to creating.

By spending some time considering and crafting your core belief, you will come to reflect your actions against it. Your belief becomes the backbone for how you choose to live your life instead of having your life live you. You probably won’t hit the target 100% of the time. I certainly don’t. But by having a core belief and communicating it, when the rabbi or cantor comes knocking, your loved ones will be able to say my father believed in something. My mother had strong core values. They lived their belief. Isn’t that legacy just as valuable as the dollars and cents that might come from our estate?

The second thing to do on the road to character is to be of service. Give your time. Volunteers who set aside their needs for the needs of others are the lifeblood of all social movements. Volunteers are one of the most powerful vehicles for change. Volunteering connects you to amazing people and important issues that may never show up in your Facebook feed.

Being of service benefits the volunteer as well. It teaches us empathy for others and allows us to be grateful for our many blessings. It helps you develop new skills and unleash ones you didn't even know you had. Being of service unleashes oxytocin into your system which boosts happiness, fine-tunes communication skills, improves everyday relationships and chases away anxiety and stress. By giving your time and talents to the world, you enrich the world and it enriches you. It's a hugely valuable gift that goes both ways.

Of one who does not give of their time and talents, the Midrash says that this person puts a sword to the world (Midrash Tanhuma, Mishpatim 2). So please find a place to serve. Be on a volunteer board, a committee and do something that asks you to roll up your sleeves. Read to a child. Take responsibility for a small corner of the planet. Serve food to the hungry. Help a homebound person chase away the scourge of loneliness. There will always be more but that doesn't give you an excuse to sit there doing nothing. I would love to learn where you give your time. Following this sermon, an email will go to the congregation. It will include suggestions for how to write your belief statement and will include a single question. "Where do you serve?" Please respond to it. If there is anything I want to brag about this congregation it is this: "look what our people do to help heal the world."

Finally. Support your community.

In a mountain village in Europe many centuries ago, there was a nobleman who was concerned about the legacy he would leave to the people of his town. At long last, he decided to build them a synagogue. One stipulation was that no one would see the plans for the building until it was finished.

At long last, the project was completed. When the people came for the first time they marveled at the synagogue's magnificence. No one could ever remember so beautiful a synagogue anywhere in the world.

Then, noticing a seemingly obvious flaw in the design, one of the children asked, "Where are the lamps? What will provide the lighting?"

Pulling aside a curtain, the nobleman revealed dozens of lanterns. He gave one to each family as he explained, "Whenever you come to the synagogue, I want you to bring your lamp, and light it. But, each time you are not here," he said, "that part of the synagogue will be dark. This lamp will remind you that whenever you are absent, some part of God's house will be dark. Your community is relying on you for light."

This community is relying on all of us to bring our light. The laws of tzedakah and terumah, of righteous giving and setting aside our earnings for communal support apply to everyone - young, old, rich, poor, male, female. This responsibility begins the moment we can count until the moment we die. Adam I views communal support in utilitarian transactional ways. Am I using it? Am I getting value for my contributions? What will I receive for my gift? Adam II views communal support in covenantal terms where a different set of questions are asked. Questions like: How can I ensure a Jewish community will be here for generations to

come? What must my role be to keep the fire burning? We need you to help our synagogue remain healthy and strong by providing fuel to keep the lights burning bright.

We are here because generations before us said, "I must build for me and I must build for the future." During the first phase of our Kadima capital campaign I have heard many of our long standing congregants express these sentiments. These leaders in our community understand the utilitarian need for a new building and they think in covenantal terms. They may object to certain details of the design. They may wish a particular detail was included but they think beyond details. These leaders support the campaign because they know it's about something greater. They believe in community and a sense of covenantal responsibility. They want the rest of us to join them, to follow their example. They want us to move from an Adam I view of the synagogue to an Adam II view. If we don't, the synagogue and Jewish life will be doomed because Jewish ideals and mitzvot are based on the life of Adam II.

When you die, how do you want to be remembered? When the Rabbi or Cantor comes knocking, what do you want your loved ones to say? It's one of the best questions we can ask ourselves. This year you have a new opportunity to allow the light of your soul to shine outward. Support your community and your surroundings with your time, your talent and your treasure. It is the only way to strengthen it. It is the only way to ensure there will be a Reform Jewish community in this little corner of the world for our children and hopefully for theirs. By doing so, you may grow in humility. You may come to realize you are part of something much larger than yourself - on a vertical plane extending back 4000 years and on a horizontal plane connecting Jews and their family members across time zones all of them looking forward towards a brighter future.

We know that the road to character is a long and winding. It is filled with bumps and potholes. Thankfully, our tradition has many examples of people who traveled the path to character. None were perfect but that doesn't mean they didn't try. Abraham may not have won the award for father of the year but he was a courageous advocate for justice and righteousness. David allowed his lust to get the better of him yet he, the author of many a psalm also did teshuvah. And Moses, whom the Torah describes as, "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth," was far from perfect. We know little of him as a father or husband, he smashed tablets, he never made it into the Promised Land yet we call him Rabbeinu, our rabbi, our teacher. His example, like those of Abraham and David, inspire us to be better than we are, to know that we may stumble and fall, but to keep failing forward, even if the road is long.

That is what it takes to be a person of character, to lift up our Adam II qualities. That is what this Day of Atonement calls upon us to do - to honestly assess our strengths and our weaknesses; to strive to do better; to commit to changing our ways, to serve, to support, to be humble enough to know that our beliefs and actions may need some re-balancing from time to time. Then, we will find ourselves on the road to character. Then, when we depart this earth and the rabbi or cantor comes knocking, our loved ones will tell the tale of one who lived according to her values, who mattered. Of one who brought meaning and purpose to life. And most importantly who was a mensch.