

Rosh Hashana Morning Service – 2009
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A rabbi who respected amongst his congregation and colleagues near and far was known as a humble person. He once received a letter from a congregant in which, at considerable length, the writer lauded in the most flattering terms the scholarship and saintly qualities of the rabbi.

For a long time the rabbi pondered over the opening salutation, which was so complimentary. His disciples, who knew that it was foreign to his nature to take any delight in such praise, after a while asked him: “Rabbi, we know that your natural modesty does not crave flattering title; why then, do you pay so much attention to the complimentary references to yourself in this letter?”

“You do not understand,” he replied; “I do not take to myself these laudatory titles, but I am thinking to myself, ‘This is what I ought to be; all that which is there written, is what I should to deserve.’”

I suppose there are people who struggle with hearing praise about them. Is it humility that prevents the rabbi from believing the laudatory comments in the congregant’s letter? Maybe the rabbi was savvy enough to know not to take the good or the bad as seriously from what people think about him. The message of this story shows that we have to be careful not only on believing what our faults might be but what our strengths are as well. At the end of the day, life challenges us to strive to be the best we can every day regardless of the years we have achieved.

Rosh Hashana provides us the opportunity to sharpen our self awareness skills regarding what others say about us versus what we know ourselves to be. The spiritual goal is to be truthful and honest about what we feel proud of in ourselves as well as the regrets over the years. Is there anything wrong with affirming that we have succeeded in living an honest and good life? Does the same apply, on the other hand, with paying heed to our mistakes and occasional poor judgment?

The High Holy Days are supposed to be about defining the total person of who we are and what we are about. Typically, repentance is traditionally geared towards the negative aspects about us. But is that the entire story of who we really are? I think not. We are all a collage of strengths and areas of growth. Being honest about our errors, and, yes, even sins, does not preclude us from embracing our gifts and the good deeds we perform.

We are inherently judgmental beings and that is not necessarily bad. The point is to be completely truthful in evaluating what we hear from others as compared to what we know to be true about ourselves. Ultimately the texts and the prayers of the High Holy Days are supposed to prompt us to be honest with ourselves and in that way to be truthful with God as well. At the end of the day, this sermon is not about external actions, rather, I am trying to say is that in Judaism God cares about our inner thoughts and how we receive and process comments, good and bad, from the people closest to us.

The best example of Judaism’s concern for the internal emotions and not only the external actions of a human being comes from the Psalms where we read,

“Search me O God, look into my heart. Try me and enter into my thoughts. Keep me from walking the path of grief and guide me in the way everlasting.” psalms

The challenge is how do we get people to be honest to themselves? Is it narcissistic to recount the good we have done? Does God care about that too? Suppose we compiled a list of our achievements? Would that overshadow our faults? Did we deserve those compliments? Was it in the form of a note or an email or phone call? Did we receive a flattering remark at a recent cocktail party or with friends out to dinner? Were we worthy of these compliments? If the answer is yes, then well and good.

But then let us ask, “Does that feedback define why we do good in the world? The rabbi understood that sometimes there is a slippery slope when it comes to receiving the praise we get from others. He knew how quickly a reaction starts with humility and then ends it with a subtle camouflaged egotism. And when that happens then have we not lost perspective about why we do good deeds? By meditating on the letter from the congregant, he was distancing himself from tempting thoughts of self aggrandizement. He knew himself well enough to realize how that kind of adulation could seduce him into a love affair with himself.

God cares what we do on the outside, but our tradition also teaches that God knows what is in the heart as well. The words of the Psalmist express this idea in a beautiful way:

“Eternal One, You see through me. You know me. You know my coming and my going. You understand my every thoughts. You measure my going about and my lying down. You are acquainted with all my ways.”

As a society have we not spent our time as parents teaching our kids to believe in themselves and to value who they are? Do we not drill into them, with an almost fundamentalist religious fervor, the belief that they should believe they are good people? It tears us apart when we watch our children exhibit behavior that triggers in us anger when they don't exhibit a positive identity about themselves?

We work hard to teach our kids to believe they are special. We have, for example, public school classes called “Gifted” which of course refers to the smart kids compared to the rest of grade. Kids are supposed to grow up with a special expertise, talent or hobby in something. We give them love and take care of them raising them to excel. Yet, that expectation to succeed does not seem to prevent the most successful grown up kids from needing therapists and struggling to deal with self esteem issues that professional achievement cannot heal?

How do we explain the all purpose woman who excels as wife, mother and professional and still secretly questions herself that she is not doing enough?

What is the root cause of the man who worked 100 hours a week and became the provider of the family and paragon of public achievement and one day checks into the local psychiatric unit after having attempted suicide?

If there is anything I have learned about people, it is that we judge ourselves so harshly and scrutinize ourselves so intensely that we can turn a positive experience into negative one in the

blink of an eye. And there comes a point in time when that kind of lifelong self afflictive behavior short circuits us in a spiritual way as well. The same is true, on the other hand, with relishing the compliments we receive and touting them as true. That kind of world view can distort our reality in just as profound a way as a poor self esteem.

If we look at the lives of people in the public eye such as elected leaders, entertainers, clergy, artists or corporate executives, there are cases when people betray the very strengths that had propelled them into notoriety in the first place.

Such self destructive behavior from notable people like Bernie Madoff and Michael Jackson, Michael Vick, Elliot Spitzer, Rod Belogovich presents a pattern of how accomplishments blind and distort our sense of reality. Their great skills including athletic prowess, artistic talent or financial acumen inspired awe in the public. Those years of tribute and adoration became, in the long run, the unsustainable drug addiction which they injected inside themselves. In each case, they finally overdosed on the drug of their success.

The world they live in is a world where people tell the successful what they want to hear because that is what they think they want to hear. When this happens, we are walking down a road of self destruction. The Bible is full of stories of people who had great skills but used their gifts in self destructive ways.

King David is one of the best examples of the person who struggled with the conflict of how to cope with the success and the love people had for him. God chose him and his skill as a musician and strategic leader and warrior enabled him to be the rock star of his time. That kind of constant adulation distorted his self esteem so that by the time he took Bath Sheba and sent her husband, Uriah the Hittite, to the front lines of battle, he had succumbed to the temptations of power.

The sons of Aaron also succumbed to the same temptations. Because of daddy's position of High Priest of the Israelites, second only to Moses, they felt politically invulnerable. How could they not have lived in a culture that elevated them and fed their egos every day? So one night they decided to offer an illegal sacrifice and purposely violated the process God had set down for them to offer sacrifices. Moments later God sent a blaze of fire, which killed the brothers instantly.

Did these people start out to hurt anyone let alone themselves? Is it fair to say that each of them lost a grip on their own ability to understand the parameters of their strengths?

A story is told by Rabbi Zusya who lay upon his death bed surrounded by his students. They tried to comfort him but observed how unhappy he was and concerned about meeting his fate. After they appealed to him to share what was really bothering him, he explained, "I am not afraid to die. I am afraid that when I appear before God in the world to come, God will ask not why was I not as good a rabbi as Abraham, Isaac or Jacob or Rabbi Akiva. What I am afraid of is when God asks me, "Why weren't you as good a rabbi as Rabbi Zusya?" "How my dear students will I answer that question?"

Was Rabbi Zusya too harsh on himself? Maybe so. Does he remind us of the rabbi who just couldn't accept the praise of the student? Are we not all living on a continuum of learning to live up to the standards we hold ourselves to knowing full well that we have not yet arrived at the point where we can say, 'we have become the person we were capable of becoming.' The rabbis say that every person should hold two scrolls wherever they go. One scroll says, "God created the world for my sake.' The other scroll says I am lower than the dust.' Age itself does not automatically confer wisdom and so, therefore, let us use these next ten days to reassess our strengths and our areas of growth.

We are not as bad as we sometimes imagine in our dark moments and not as praiseworthy either. Most of us find ourselves somewhere in the middle. So the work continues for most of us to improve and grow the person we are capable of becoming. Sometimes the past can enlighten us and, at other times, it can constrain us. The sages were deeply interested in posing the challenge of each person assessing their lives and being aware of the need to grow every day as part of the purpose of religious teaching in Judaism.