

## **“Making Self-Centeredness A Holy Pursuit”**

**Rosh Hashanah Day 1 – 5777**

**Rabbi K’vod Wieder**

This past year, we lost a great Jewish thinker, writer, and humanitarian Elie Wiesel. He offered a parable for our times:

*Once upon a time, Human complained to God: “You have no idea how hard it is to be human -- to live a life darkened by suffering and despair in a world filled with violence and destruction, to fear death and worry that nothing we do or create or dream matters. You have no idea how hard it is to be human!”*

*God responded, “You think that it’s easy being God? I have a whole universe to run, a whole universe demanding constant vigilance. You think you could do that?”*

*“I’ll tell you what,” suggested the Human, “let’s switch places, for just a moment. For just a moment, You be Human, and I’ll be God, and that way we’ll see who has it harder.”*

*“For just a moment?” God considered, “Agreed.”*

*So Human and God switched places. Human sat upon God’s throne. And God descended to the earth. After a moment passed, God looked up and said, “OK, time to switch back.” But Human refused. Human refused to give up the throne of God. This is our world -- where Human plays God, and God is exiled.*

While none of us would ever presume to play God, we cannot avoid the fact that we are basically self-centered. And it’s not our fault. This part of our nature is hard-wired in and our rabbis refer to it as the *Yetzer Hara* – the evil inclination. However, they didn’t see this as an inherently bad thing, but a necessary one. A famous midrash, commentary on the Torah teaches that without the *Yetzer Hara*, without self-centeredness – “we

wouldn't have families, create, or build society." Our very desire to create comes from our desire to enhance ourselves, our reality.

While this has always been the reality of human experience, what is worth noting is that in the last fifty years, our western culture has focused more on individual needs and wants than ever before. In her book "The Narcissism Epidemic," social psychologist, Jean Twenge has cited numerous short and long-term studies that elucidate this reality. For example, when people get read statements like "I like to be the center of attention" or "I show off if I get the chance because I am extraordinary" or "Somebody should write a biography about me," 93% more young people today say these statements apply to them, than they did 20 years ago.

Along with the apparent rise in self-esteem, there has been a tremendous increase in the desire for fame. Fame used to rank low as a life's ambition for most people. In a 1976 survey that asked people to list their life goals, fame ranked fifteenth out of sixteen. By 2007, 51% of young people reported that being famous was one of their top personal goals. In one study, middle school girls were asked who they would like to have dinner with. Jennifer Lopez came in first, Jesus Christ came in second, and Paris Hilton third.

Our social media encourages a broadcasting personality – allowing us to spend our time engaged in a hyper competitive struggle for attention, for victories in the currency of "likes." People are given more occasions to be self-promoters, to embrace the characteristics of celebrity, to manage their own image, to Snapchat out their selfies in ways that they hope will impress and please the world. This technology creates a culture in which people turn into little brand managers, using Facebook, Twitter, text messages, and Instagram to create a falsely upbeat, external self that can be famous first in a small sphere and then, with luck, in a larger one. The

social media maven spends his or her time creating a self-caricature, a much happier and more photogenic version of real life. People subtly start comparing themselves to other people's highlight reels, and of course they feel inferior.

Here is the main problem with this orientation to life – we are steeped in a culture where success is defined externally. The things that we produce – money, educational degrees, fame, relationships, social circles, projects, even our children – define our value and who we are. And if our investment and primary focus is on these definitions of success, then we may have a vague anxiety that our life has not achieved its ultimate meaning and significance. When we are not stimulated by the externals, we may live with an unconscious boredom, not really loving, not really attached to the moral purposes that give life its worth. We may never develop an inner constancy, the integrity that can withstand popular disapproval or a serious blow. We may find ourselves doing things that other people approve of, whether these things are right for us or not. We may foolishly judge other people by their abilities and what they have, not by their inner character. We don't want to be people who die in our 30's but are not buried until our 90's.

In his book, "The Road to Character," NY Times columnist David Brooks distinguishes between resume virtues and eulogy virtues. The resume virtues are obviously the skills that bring you to the job market and contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are the ones that get talked about at our funerals – they are the measure of who we are – how we impact and inspire others. And while many would all agree that the eulogy virtues are deeper and more important, if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that we have spent more actual energy cultivating the resume ones. Our education system is oriented towards them. Public conversation, the self-help tips in magazines, the nonfiction

bestsellers, the attention that people get in the media are all oriented towards this external success, not how do we build character, how do we become more moral people, more holy people.

An extreme example of a person's lack of attention on their character can be found in the true obituary of Dolores Aguilar that ran in a Los Angeles paper on August 16 and 17<sup>th</sup> of 2008.

*Dolores Aguilar, born in 1929 in New Mexico, left us on August 7, 2008. (It then goes on to list the long line of family and descendants.)*

*Dolores had no hobbies, made no contribution to society and rarely shared a kind word or deed in her life. I speak for the majority of her family when I say her presence will not be missed by many, very few tears will be shed and there will be no lamenting over her passing. Her family will remember Dolores and amongst ourselves we will remember her in our own way, which were mostly sad and troubling times throughout the years. We may have some fond memories of her and perhaps we will think of those times too. But I truly believe at the end of the day ALL of us will really only miss what we never had, a good and kind mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. I hope she is finally at peace with herself.*

*As for the rest of us left behind, I hope this is the beginning of a time of healing and learning to be a family again. There will be no service, no prayers and no closure for the family she spent a lifetime tearing apart. We cannot come together in the end to see to it that her grandchildren and great-grandchildren can say their goodbyes. So I say here for all of us, GOOD BYE, MOM.*

So how do we develop these deeper virtues." It all starts with humility – an awareness of our "almost unlimited ability to ignore our ignorance." The people that we think are wise have, to some degree, overcome the biases and overconfident tendencies that are infused in our nature. David Brooks comments that "intellectual humility is accurate self-awareness from a

distance. It is moving over the course of one's life from the adolescent close-up view of yourself, in which you fill the whole canvas, to a landscape view in which you see, from a wider perspective, your strengths and weaknesses, your connections and dependencies, and the role you play in a larger story."

The Hebrew word for humility is "anavah" and used to describe the core quality of Moses in the Torah. Moses merited the relationship with God that he had and the mission that he was charged with because he was willing to be honest about his own character defects and as a result they did not get in the way of his mission and purpose. When God first told him to free the people of Israel, he resisted because he was honest about his inability to speak. Our rabbis teach that this wasn't low self-esteem or false humility, but a real weakness that Moses was able to claim and own.

An orientation of humility acknowledges that we are all deeply divided selves, we have certain talents, but also certain weaknesses. And if we don't struggle against the weaknesses in ourselves, then we will gradually pollute our relationship with ourselves, with others, and with God. This orientation assumes that living these deeper virtues is not something innate or automatic, but has to be built with effort. Mussar teacher Alan Morinis points out that "our weaknesses are our curriculum." We have the opportunity to truly define success, not by what we have, but by who we are. In this way, our innate self-centeredness is not playing God, about supporting a false vision of who we hope to be, but instead being honest about who we truly are and working slowly, step by step, to be a person of greater integrity. The last book of the Torah – Deuteronomy is an entire book of Moses's words, a testament that he was able to overcome his own weakness by being real about it and giving attention to improving it.

It's important to note that our rabbis have always taught that the struggle against weaknesses in ourselves is never a solitary struggle. No person can achieve self mastery on his or her own. Individual will, reason, compassion, and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed, and self-deception. Everybody needs assistance from the outside – from family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, exemplars, and God. We all need people to tell us when we are wrong, to advise us on how to do right, and to encourage, support, arouse, cooperate, and inspire us along the way.

These kinds of sacred relationships are what we aspire to cultivate and deepen at Temple Beth El. In a secular culture that defines success externally, this community is where we can find the teachings, the tools, and especially the people, who can support and inspire us to become more and more menschlike – more and more of a person with depth, with character, with integrity, who will leave a legacy of love and goodness to all that we touch.

Through an intentional process this last spring, our congregation determined that one of the main focus of our synagogue is to build sacred relationships – connections with each other that help bring out the best in us – our own menschlekeit. While there are numerous opportunities through classes, worship, social events, and being of service, we are launching a synagogue-wide small group initiative to create opportunities to build and deepen relationships around the topic of “How Our Relationships Can Help Us Live More Fully.” We are encouraging everyone in the synagogue become a part of a small group – to be part of a six week process of meeting in someone's home for focused discussion around this meaningful topic. You can choose to be a host or a participant. Being a host requires no prior knowledge or expertise in any Judaic field. It only means opening your home once a week for six weeks for a one hour

gathering, turning on a DVD or YouTube video, and serving a snack. If you choose to be a host, please make sure to pick up a HOST booklet and DVD that will be available outside of services on Yom Kippur. This is one of the more exciting initiatives we've launched, since when we arrive at its conclusion, after a mere six hours spent together, we will have the potential of being a community of deepened character, of widely nurtured sacred relationships, of living *menschlekeit*.

One of the names of Rosh Hashanah is "Yom HaDin" – the day of judgement – not about being judged by some external presence, but in the sense of judgment as discernment. Whenever we make a choice – our process of choosing is about "judging" or "discerning" between two or more options. Rosh Hashanah celebrates creation and renewal because we create our lives through our choices. Today is about the vision and clarity that can guide us towards life affirming choices, towards choices that allow us to be a person of character and to be a light unto the world.