

Our horizons during this season of the Days of Awe are for the most part limited to reviewing the events of the past year and praying for the blessings of health, happiness and peace in the year to come. I feel that I would be remiss in my rabbinic responsibilities, however, if, before I launch into the main part of my remarks, I did not ask you to consider for a moment a broader horizon. Our country and our world are beset by daunting challenges – first and foremost, climate change which threatens the well-being of generations to come and which will become more difficult and more expensive to address the longer we postpone dealing with it and secondly, the growing inequality in wealth and in incomes here in America and the erosion of our middle class, which is the backbone of civil society in a democracy. You and I may differ on the solutions to these challenges, but their existence and their serious implications are facts that can not and should not be denied. It is particularly troubling that in our atmosphere of gridlock, hyper-partisanship and soundbites and with the blatant corruption of the political process by money, we lack both the will and the ability to act on these challenges in a meaningful way. Well and good that we **pray** for our own well-being and that of our loved ones **during the coming year**. We also need to **act**, to **work** on the challenges that will impact the lives of our grandchildren now and **many years hence**, to ask ourselves what kind of country and what kind of world we will bequeath to them?

I urge you not to give up on trying to change and influence the world. Your voice and efforts are vital, particularly when joined to those of others. But having spoken of these global and national challenges (as I feel I must), I now want to focus on a more limited domain, one over which we have more control and where our efforts to bring about change can potentially achieve greater and more immediate success – namely, changing ourselves. I am reminded of the story I have told, perhaps several times before, from this pulpit of the rabbi who began his career hoping to change the world and who, as the years went by, scaled back his ambitions to influencing his community, then his congregation and then his family, until he at last realized that if he could change only himself he would be accomplishing a great deal.

This is a season of self-reckoning, of taking account of our shortcomings, and seeking to remedy them. Because we are human and mortal, we are, each of us in our various ways, flawed and imperfect. We are all in need of moral improvement. Even the

patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, who established and upheld our people's covenant with God had their flaws, so richly described in the pages of Genesis. They are not depicted as cardboard saints, and, as Biblical scholar Rabbi Burt Visotzky observes, we don't read the Scriptural narratives in order to find role models of perfection but rather to understand the ethical dilemmas our forbears confronted and to have a point of departure for our process of moral reasoning. We may find the lengthy hours of prayer during these holidays wearying and arduous, the repeated emphasis on human frailty, mortality and sinfulness uncomfortable and heavy-handed, but I can tell you that some of my non-Jewish friends admire our tradition's moral earnestness and envy us the opportunity Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur provide for the spiritual and ethical renewal all of us need.

When I say that the process of self-change is subject to our own control, I by no means underestimate the difficulty of trying to break free of long-standing patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving. Perhaps we should consider the effort analogous to physical exercise. I confess to being flabbier than I want to be, carrying around some pounds on my body in excess of my ideal weight, and lacking the strength and stamina that I would like to have. I have no doubt that if I were to actually make use of the Y membership for which I pay a monthly fee, I might attain some of those desired goals. Similarly, with sustained effort to cultivate the spiritual and ethical traits commended by our tradition, I might become the better and kinder person I wish to be.

The preoccupation with personal ethics and with the cultivation of ethical qualities has a name in our tradition – Musar. The Musar tradition goes back to the golden age of Spanish Jewry, to ibn Gabirol and Maimonides eight to nine hundred years ago, and, in more recent times, influenced the curriculum of the famed Lithuanian yeshivot. The latter sometimes carried the quest for ethical perfection to an extreme, veering towards asceticism, self-denial and the obliteration of the ego. Spiritual and moral exercises, like their physical counterpart, can be taken to excess, and as my grandfather said, *tzu fiel is umgezund*, too much even of a good thing is unhealthy. The traits and qualities Musar endeavors to cultivate are referred to as *middot*. The word is derived from the Hebrew for “measure”. Leviticus, for example, admonishes us *lo ta'asu avel b'midah*. Do no injustice in measurement. Have honest measures, don't short your

customer on what he has paid for. When we strive to attain *middot*, ethical qualities, we are trying to measure up to our values and ideals, to achieve our full stature as humans.

Of the many *middot* referred to in Jewish ethical literature, I want to focus this morning on two particular ones *chesed*, kindness and *hoda'ah* or *hakarat tovah*, gratitude. The Dalai Lama was once asked what his religion was. The questioner may perhaps have known that there are various branches within Buddhism and may have been seeking some clarification from the Dalai Lama regarding Tibetan Buddhist beliefs. The answer he received was quite different from what he expected. "My religion," said the Dalai Lama, "is lovingkindness." Another quote of which I am fond is mistakenly attributed to Philo, a first century Jewish philosopher who wrote his works in Greek, but in fact originated with Ian Maclaren, a late 19th century Scottish author and pastor. "Be kind to everyone, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

I am proud of my Jewishness and find so much in our heritage to admire and celebrate, and I have no doubt that, were I to be asked what my religion was, I would without a moment's hesitation reply "Jewish". Yet the Dalai Lama's response to his questioner leaves me awestruck. The obligation to act toward our fellow persons with lovingkindness trumps all distinctions of race, nationality or creed, surpasses in importance all considerations of theology and ritual, and lies at the heart of many if not most of humankind's faith traditions. In the preliminary prayers of the morning service, we pray that we might find grace, **kindness** and compassion not only in God's sight but also *b'einei chol ro'einu*, in the sight of all who look upon us. We want to be treated with kindness, and as creatures fashioned in the Divine image, we are worthy of being so treated. And we have the obligation to treat in similar fashion our fellow persons, who are equally God's creatures. My English-Hebrew dictionary informs me that another expression denoting kindness is *tuv lev*, literally "goodness of heart", precisely the answer given by Rabbi Elazar in the Ethics of the Fathers to the query of his teacher Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, "which is the right path to which one should cling?" Rabban Yochanan, it is recorded, preferred the answer of Rabbi Elazar, *lev tov*, "a good heart", to those of his other students, because it was the most comprehensive.

Maclaren hints at our shared human condition. We can never know the burdens that our fellow is bearing, the inner struggles that he or she is fighting. All of us at times

face discouragement and adversity, are troubled by regret over the past and anxiety regarding the future. A kind word or gesture from someone at such a time would doubtless lift us up. All of us during moments of stress and difficulty might feel that we have the perfect excuse to be unkind, to relieve the pressure on ourselves at the expense of someone else's feelings, but we must resist that impulse. We're not the only one who might be anxious or discouraged. Who knows what stresses and difficulties the other person is experiencing, of which we might not even be aware?

What Maclaren is asking of us – be kind to everyone – is, admittedly, surpassingly difficult. There are people whom we know and deal with in various settings who tax our patience in manifold ways and people who themselves are unkind or inconsiderate to us. But there are better ways to protect our boundaries and assert our own interests than unkindness. Mockery, sarcasm, and name-calling, the raised voice and the sharp word may be momentarily satisfying but ultimately poison the atmosphere. Proverbs tells us that a gentle response turns away wrath. Sixties radical that I am, I recall the song, “let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.” During this coming year, let there be kindness on earth and let it begin with us! There is too much meanness of spirit in our politics and our public discourse; the practice of kindness is sorely needed as an antidote to restore the wholeness of human relationships in our fractured world.

Hoda'ah means gratitude but it is also the name of the next to the last *b'rachah* of the *Amidah*. Three times a day the observant Jew, when praying to God, says *modim anachnu lach*, we gratefully acknowledge. *Hakarat tovah*, the other expression denoting gratitude means recognition of the good that has come our way. Rabbi Shai Held in a *dvar Torah* that I shared with our Shabbat morning worshipers several weeks ago, noted that the book of Deuteronomy considers prosperity and well-being a blessing but also a temptation. Ingratitude, in Deuteronomy's view, leads to apostasy, faithlessness, and straying from the service of God. Too often people feel a sense of entitlement, as if the prosperity and security they enjoy, the pleasures and comforts that enhance their lives are all things that they have coming to them and that they can take for granted. Even when it is not a question of entitlement, when people do work hard and their efforts are crowned with success, they may be lacking in gratitude and may be inclined to feel that they have earned whatever wealth and status they have achieved. Deuteronomy cautions us: yes,

you have earned what you have, but remember that it is God, Who gives you *ko'ach*, the physical strength and stamina and the gifts of knowledge and intellect that make your labors and your success possible. In Judaism, gratitude is expressed not only through prayers of thanksgiving but also through sharing our blessings with those less fortunate. How often does Deuteronomy command us when we are celebrating to provide for the stranger, the widow and the orphan and for the Levite who was not allotted a portion of land of his own!

One of the most touching of experiences for me has come when ministering to those who are terminally ill, who are likely to be in great pain or discomfort, suffering weakness and fatigue, contemplating their mortality, and worrying about the dear ones they will be leaving behind. And yet I sometimes hear from them that their illness has taught them lessons about life that had eluded them during their years of health and well-being and that, with all the sadness, pain and anxiety they feel, they are still grateful for what they have had. Gratitude is not necessarily linked to comfort or abundance but is a *midah*, a trait that must be learned and cultivated and that imparts wholeness and tranquility, even in the most difficult of situations. One can have much and never be satisfied, and one can have little and feel deeply grateful.

Ingratitude distances us from God, and according to a blog piece I read recently, should be considered the cardinal sin in human relationships as well. Society is built on trust, and one who betrays the trust reposed in him has undermined the network of relationships of which community is comprised by making others wary and suspicious in their dealings with fellow persons. Similarly, gratitude and appreciation are essential to the well-being of society. Humans often act out of self-interest and with ulterior motives, heedless of how their words and deeds will affect others, but they do on occasion display a remarkable capacity for empathy, for generosity of spirit and for going out of their way to offer help and support to those in need. When that happens, it should never be taken for granted. I am well aware of the Rabbinic tradition that we as individuals should serve God *lish'mah*, for the sake of serving, and without expectation of reward, and, presumably, the same applies to serving our fellow persons and performing good deeds for their benefit. Humans being humans, however, we do sometimes need the reinforcement that comes from a word of thanks and appreciation. And the recipient of a

gratuitous and disinterested kindness needs to offer that reinforcement as a way of upholding and strengthening virtue within the community and communicating that he does not take the benefactor's actions as his entitlement.

May this be a year of health, happiness and blessing for all, a year in which humankind grapples seriously and constructively with the challenges that will affect the well-being of our posterity, a year in which we grow in our capacity for kindness and gratitude and in all of the worthy *middot*, that define our character.