

Rosh Hashanah 5777

Individual Character

A sermon

Delivered by

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L'shana Tova. Thank yous.

I believe in the idea of an old soul. I am not sure if that means I believe in reincarnation or not, but I do believe that our souls carry a bit of eternity in them. And I also believe in the idea of a new soul—a fully new creation just opening eyes and heart and mind to the world.

I believe that the soul is a gift given from the Almighty—but I also believe a soul can be grown or developed or nurtured, as if we humans actually have a fair degree of control with our souls. Rabbi Milton Steinberg describes the development of the soul as the road from consciousness to maturity, from being purely self-centered to being aware of and concerned for and inexorably linked to the other.

I believe that our souls can have parts old and parts new, and that most of us walk around with some unknown mix which reveals itself only over the course of a lifetime. And above all, I believe that our character—the way we live, the traits we use and are used by others to describe us, function as the language of the soul.

Judaism spends precious little time on the role of the soul, from whence it came and where it is going. We believe that souls live on, we believe that our souls come from God and go to God. But beyond that, the soul, and the life of the soul, remain shrouded in mystery. But our tradition does expend great energy and capital on the notion of character—*midot*—ethics, on the choices we make and how we live our lives.

This summer I watched moments of old soul and new soul in my own family.

I watched as one child stood on a staircase a story or two above the Western Wall stunned by what he was seeing, vacillating between acting like he had been there before and was returning in a very real way and marveling at this totally new sight.

And I watched another child explore all that was new, soaking it all in, dreaming not of the past but of what could yet be, yet also acting with a level of familiarity which could only come from having somehow seen all of this before. The souls were a study in contrast—and both were deeply moving.

Melissa and I have often wondered about the souls of our children—enjoying sparks of relatives long deceased in the words and actions and demeanor of Zachary, Jacob and Lizzie. We have wondered often how we can best nurture those three souls. In the months since those two experiences in Israel, I have thought intensely about the development of the soul and the role of character in the soul's growth.

I believe that our character—the attributes which define our lives, have a direct link to something beyond our minds. Character comes from and reflects our souls. When we live with the highest values of character, our souls shine. And when we fail, our souls hide, limiting our ability to do good or be fully present.

In a very real sense, our character determines whether we live or fail to live.

The columnist David Brooks has spent the better part of the last year writing about character and the development of character. In column after column, and in his book The Road to Character, Brooks has described the choices we make in life and their effects on our character.

In the introduction to his book, Brooks differentiates between resume virtues and eulogy virtues. Most of us, suggests Brooks, spend our life pursuing the resume virtues—material success, advancement at work, climbing the social ladder. And he argues that most of us who take this route are misguided. Instead we should be focused on the virtues which describe who we are: kindness, friendship, gratitude, philanthropy, thoughtfulness. These virtues are the eulogy virtues, the aspects which will be remembered and honored long after we are gone.

Brooks uses the great Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik to build his case. In the 60's, Soloveitchik wrote a book called The Lonely Man of Faith. In it, Rabbi Soloveitchik describes Adam, the first human, and the different aspects of Adam we learn in the opening creation stories of Genesis.

In the first story, the Adam of the six days of creation is the resume virtues version—the person consumed with building and controlling and power. This Adam wants to conquer, to be in charge, to move the ball down the field. The second Adam, found in the Garden of Eden story of creation, displays a desire to build relationships, to experience love, to understand right and wrong. Adam I and Adam II are in all of us, argues Brooks---we are daily faced with the challenge of deciding which model to follow.

Our world pushes us toward following Adam I and developing our resume virtues. We are constantly reminded to pursue the next big thing, to purchase the next great invention, to spend and build our way forward. But when we reach the end, and when I sit down with families to prepare eulogies, it is Adam II who is desired. We want to see the meaning in our lives, the values we upheld, the goodness we achieved and shared. Brooks correctly notes that we have choices to make. And our liturgy during the High Holy Days illustrates these choices.

Just a bit ago, we read a deeply difficult prayer called Unetaneh Tokef. The prayer, which we will read again on Yom Kippur, forces us to confront our own mortality. Look with me at page 178, and together we can see the stark language. Who will live and who will die, who by fire and who by water and on and on and on.

For centuries these words have shaken and stirred our people. We have wrestled with the literal meaning, wondering why we utter such phrases. For the literalists among us, this prayer reminds us of God's actions this time of year, sitting in judgment deciding who among us will live and who will die. And for the non-literalists among us, the words are a stark reminder of the fragility of life, of the razor thin line between life and death.

One of my teachers, Rabbi Ed Feinstein of Valley Beth Shalom in Los Angeles, offers a new understanding of this prayer which I believe provides both comfort and honesty. Rabbi Feinstein suggests that to best understand the prayer we need to change the subject of each line. Instead of 'who shall live,' read I shall live. I have the ability to chart my own course. My decisions will lead to my living in the next year or my dying in the next year. My actions will determine whether my character grows or shrivels, whether my life and my world are made more whole or more broken.

Unetaneh Tokef calls out to us not to scare us but to light a fire, to remind us that we have real work to do, that we can be products of our circumstances or we can overcome those circumstances—the choice is ours. Unetaneh Tokef uses the starkest of language not to induce fear but rather to promote optimism, to unleash the best that is in all of us so that we can live fully. Unetaneh Tokef need not be a moment for questioning God, but rather provides a moment for us to question ourselves!

Our souls are in fact on trial during these holidays—but we are in the judge's chair. We can determine if we wish to continue as we have, knowing that those choices may lead to the death of the soul. Or we can choose to make changes, to embrace life and all of its possibilities, giving ourselves permission to let our souls continue to grow and soar. And in that choice, in those quiet moments of introspection, character counts. Our actions will reveal our choices, our character navigating for our souls on the journey in the coming year.

Our tradition and our prayers add an interesting wrinkle to these moments of looking inward. While each of us takes an accounting of our own actions and begins to develop an individual plan for the new year, our liturgy continually speaks in the first person plural. Each of us must make choices, but collectively we also face this stark confrontation. The constant battle of me versus we comes to the fore during these holidays. Look around this room right now—we are all joined together!

When I read the litany of transgressions in the confessional prayer, I force myself, however uncomfortable it may be, to acknowledge my own mistakes. And, frankly, I breathe a sigh of relief when I utter an action of which I am not guilty. And in my lower moments, I must acknowledge, like many of you, my eyes wander around wondering who among us has committed which action. And then I snap out of it, and realize that our tradition does not call us to judge each other but rather to hold up each other, to support and carry and recognize that each of us, all of us, have flaws. All of us have transgressed. All of us have missed the mark. And each of us is responsible for each other.

This constant battle between the me and the we can be seen in our country today. We all want to be the rugged individualist, responsible only for ourselves. But ours is a nation that thrives on connectedness, on the shared sacrifice and triumph of all. Our souls, both as Americans and as Jews are neither lived nor judged individually. Instead, our souls, and our character shine brightest when we see the blossoming of relationships and interactions.

In a wonderful new book published this year, Rabbi Donniel Hartman provides a powerful model to strengthen our character and find better balance in our lives. I studied with Donniel this summer, and found his teaching both challenging and refreshing.

Donniel suggests that too often those who claim to be religious put their beliefs first, and their interactions with other people second. In making this choice, people fail to see that the purpose of religion is to enhance our lives, not limit them. So he suggests that we put God second, and place our relationships first.

For Rabbi Hartman, character reveals itself not in belief but in action. When we are consumed by our beliefs our character becomes blinded. We fail to see the ultimate humanity of the other, and our lives become filled with meaningless actions instead of deep meaningful interactions. Character calls us to put even our most closely held beliefs aside so that we can better connect with others. Character calls us to use belief as a motivator for action, rather than an end in itself.

Seeing the I in our confessions, wrestling with the me and the we, finding a willingness to put God second—each of these can help us better develop our own character. Each helps us turn inward while also engaging outward, each reminds us of the importance of inner work while also calling us to reach out and connect with others.

In this new year, each of us will choose which part of Hillel's famous dictum to follow. If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? And if not now, when? We can chose to be only for ourselves, or for ourselves first. Or we can choose to ignore ourselves, hoping that others will care for us. The urgency of now cries out—how will we act in the days and weeks and months to come? Our answers will define our character, and in a very real sense, our answers will determine the way we live, or fail to live, in the coming year.

L'shana Tova.