Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5784

Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz
B'nai Israel Congregation

You Used To Be Nicer

It is that time of the year, so let me begin as I do with all of my sermons on Rosh Hashanah, with a confession. I confess that I believed that you used to be nicer. You heard that right—I'm not sure what has happened over the past six years, but I believed that you were nicer when I arrived than you are now. You were kinder, you were more patient, and you were more understanding. Those were the good ol' days, the honeymoon phase, the bygone era. And now I ask that you confess, too. How many of you believe that, generally speaking, people used to be nicer? That the world used to be safer? How often do you yearn for a time when things were better? Well, the science is on our side, because when questions like these are asked of people around the world, the results are consistent. On more than 80% of questions asked in similar surveys worldwide, a majority say that things used to be better, that morality in our world has declined.[1] The majority of us believe this. And yet, the studies also say that our conclusions are wrong. Although we perceive this to be true, it is *not* true that you used to be nicer or that the world used to be better. We all believe in an incredible myth, what one group of social scientists has dubbed "the illusion of moral decline." The data says that we are all wrong.

A study published in June of this year demonstrates that the majority of people hold two principles to be true, but they cannot both be true. (1) That morality around the world is declining; people are not as nice as they used to be; and (2) that our contemporaries with

[1] Adam M. Mastroianni & Daniel T. Gilbert, "The illusion of moral decline," *Nature,* Vol. 618, June 2023, p. 783.

whom we have meaningful connections and relationships have remained just as nice or are even nicer.[2] Everyone else is mean and immoral, but not *my* people. This simply cannot be true. We know from a historical perspective that humanity is kinder and the world is more peaceful for its inhabitants than it was many years ago.[3] In measurable ways, the majority of people in the world live an existence today that is safer, healthier, and better than it was decades ago, and certainly better than it was centuries ago. Moral decline is an illusion; it is a myth to which many of us have subscribed.

As I have spoken about before, myths are powerful because they constitute the framework within which civilizations operate. The problem with this particular myth of moral decline is that it is patently false. Although it feels this way, the world is not in a downward spiral. Yet there is a Jewish concept that mirrors this idea which we call *yeridat hadorot*, literally "the decline of the generations." The concept posits that in each successive generation, as we get farther away from the moment of standing at Mount Sinai and receiving the Torah from God, the less capable we are to understand and properly interpret Jewish law. We are intellectually inferior to our ancient Israelite ancestors who heard the sacred words uttered by God. One of our Talmudic sages offered a similar sentiment when he said, " אִם רִאשׁוֹנִים בְּנֵי מַלְאָכִים, If the early generations are referred to as 'children of angels,' then we are simply the children of human beings. But if the early generations are referred to as children of human beings, אָנוּ בַּחֲמוֹרִים, then we are like jackasses."[4]

[2] Mastroianni & Gilbert, p. 782.
[3] Mastroianni & Gilbert, p. 785.
[4] Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 112b.

The only redeeming quality I can find in the concept of *yeridat hadorot* is that it reminds us to be humble and to maintain a certain perspective of the past. There may indeed be things that we do not understand, but telling me that I am intellectually inferior and unable to comprehend is not terribly compelling. Although the Conservative movement has not officially rejected the concept, we certainly push back against it. For the movement with the motto "tradition *and* change," we assert that modernity presents us with a *more* developed sense of morality and ethics. Today, our values include egalitarianism and inclusion, which are positive values that have moved us in the right direction. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, the body which issues statements and rulings on Conservative Jewish law today, is the counterexample to *yeridat hodorot*. Not only are we *not* inferior to our ancestors, but we firmly believe that our convictions reflect values that are more enlightened and, in many ways, more sophisticated than those of earlier generations.

What, then, accounts for the illusion of moral decline? One study explains that there are two psychological phenomena at work. The first is that we are more likely to gravitate towards and focus upon negative information about others.[5] That is why we believe that people today are not very nice. And the second phenomenon is that we often forget negative events as we get farther away from them.[6] The result is that our negative memories from distant times are being wiped from our minds, and therefore the present time feels more troubling and problematic because those negative memories are still fresh in our minds. The study suggests that we are inclined to see today as a moral wasteland and the past as a moral wonderland.

[5] Mastroianni & Gilbert, p. 786.
[6] Ibid.

Therefore, “when people in a wasteland remember being in a wonderland, they may naturally conclude that the landscape has changed.”[7] We cannot change these psychological phenomena that are at work, but knowing and understanding these realities, we can change the manner in which we respond.

We know it is true that we are more disconnected from one another than we were in the past. We know that there is a mental health crisis in our country, especially amongst teens. The numbers are staggering: 1 out of 7 pre-teens and teens experiences a mental disorder, and in the Jewish community the rates of depression are higher than in the Christian community. Believing in the illusion of moral decline only perpetuates and exacerbates the problem because it discourages us from reaching out to others and making meaningful connections with them. Therefore, the antidote to the illusion of moral decline is to cultivate a more engaged and interconnected community, to make more people your people.

Building stronger communities is easier said than done. If I knew precisely the right answer, I would be a rabbinic consultant instead of just a rabbi. There are many ingredients that contribute to the formation of a strong community. One important ingredient is to have community leaders who are willing to engage in this work, who carve out time to do the work, which can be tedious, messy, and time-consuming. I am willing to do this, and so are the rest of the clergy, along with our lay leaders and committee chairs. That is why we are in this business.

The other important ingredient is the one where I anticipate we will face some resistance. We need all of you, our community members, to be invested in this work, too. Nobody can do this for you. I cannot make friends for you. I cannot build a strong community of

[7] Ibid.

individuals when people are apathetic about meeting others and really getting to know them. And even if I could do it, still it would never be enough.

Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel (1849-1927) offers a beautiful teaching in which he explores this idea. He reminds us that God's Creation was made for us and for our enjoyment. This is a core principle of Jewish though—the world is a gift from God for us to enjoy responsibly. But we do not only enjoy things as individuals; we also experience joy vicariously through others. We are happy when we see that others are happy. And then he offers his *hiddush*, his novel idea. Receiving all of the joy in the world, both our own and the joy of others, still is never enough for us. Why not? Because being a passive receiver of joy is insufficient. What brings us real joy and fulfillment is being a giver of joy, being the type of person who is actively involved in creating joy for someone else. This attribute is called *hesed*, true lovingkindness, and it is planted within each and every one of us. It is a desire to actively give of ourself to others. Rabbi Natan Tzvi Finkel writes, "Giving is the true zenith of receiving, and giving is itself the enjoyment that we receive from it."[8] Being an active giver makes you happier and more satisfied than being a passive receiver.

It might seem counterintuitive, and that is precisely why it is a brilliant *hiddush*, a novel idea. We might expect that constantly receiving things that we want will make us happier. But the opposite is true: being the giver is what brings us true happiness. And this isn't just some idea posited by a rabbi based on Jewish texts. The truth of this concept has also been demonstrated in studies. In 2016, participants in an online study were randomly assigned to four groups: to do nice things for others, to do nice things for the world, to do nice things for

[8] Netivot HaHesed.

themselves, and a group that was assigned a neutral control activity. The results of the study demonstrated that "as people do nice things for others, they may feel greater joy, contentment, and love, which in turn promote greater overall wellbeing and improve social relationships."[9] The more you do for others, the greater you feel because you are activating a cycle that leads to people becoming more trusting of others, forming more inclusive and cohesive social groups, and expanding your sense of self to include others. You make more people, your people. You provide a *tikkun*, a repair to what we all perceive as the fracturing of our society. We talk about self-care as if that only includes treating ourselves, but the study's authors prove that we might be more successful if instead we treat someone else.[10] You will get more out of things where you actively contribute and invest than you will from things where you are only a passive receiver and a beneficiary of services.

During our SEA Change trainings a couple years ago, we learned from Jeannie Appleman, senior organizer and trainer for JOIN for Justice. One of the most important lessons of Jeannie's trainings is to follow her Iron Rule of community organizing: Do not do for others, what they can do for themselves. The rule flips the model that is so pervasive, and so incredibly unsustainable, in most synagogue settings. Sometimes, synagogues operate in a transactional model: Members come forward to leadership with their next great idea, and they expect that the paid staff and clergy will execute all necessary tasks in order to transform their idea into a reality. Sometimes, we even do that, and yet it rarely results in increased participation or more meaningful engagement, even for the one who had the original idea. And this is because although it was

[9] S Katherine Nelson, Kristin Layous, Steven W. Cole, "Do unto others or treat yourself? The effects of prosocial and self-focused behavior on psychological flourishing." in *Emotion* 16(6), 9/1/2016.
[10] Nelson, Layous, & Cole, p. 850.

their idea, they really did not have a stake, they did not have skin in the game. This approach perpetuates an unhealthy system of deeply transactional relationships. But if we follow Jeannie's Iron Rule, then the entire dynamic is transformed. Through meaningful and intentional conversation, we together determine what are the tasks that you can do, who are the other individuals in our orbit who might be interested in partnering with us in this project, what are their skills, talents, and expertise, and what can I do to empower you, assist you, and help to transform your dream into a reality. In an article about why American Christians have stopped attending church, the author writes, "a vibrant, life-giving church requires more, not less, time and energy from its members. It asks people to prioritize one another over our career."[11] When you do this, when you prioritize other people over personal gain, then you have a stake with them, everyone is more deeply invested. And if God-willing all goes well, you will feel the incredible satisfaction that comes from giving of yourself to the community, to building those relationships, to making more people, your people.

I know that what I am saying may be bothersome to you. It may challenge your expectations of what a synagogue exists to do. But my role as a spiritual leader is to do just that: to challenge you in ways that will hopefully lead to growth, nourishment, and fulfillment. One is never too old, or too young, to reconsider their expectations of the world.

On Rosh Hashanah we read the narrative of the Akeidah, the Binding of Isaac, one of the most deeply distressing and problematic narratives in the entire Torah. I facilitated a workshop last week in which we examined Abraham as a character, both faithful and flawed, and used our

[11] Jake Meador, "The Misunderstood Reason Millions of Americans Stopped Going to Church," in *The Atlantic*, July 29, 2023.

understanding of him as a lens through which to read this troubling text. If we can see the narrative as a myth, as a story with a lesson rather than an historical event, we can remove just *some* of our discomfort about its particularities, and instead see within it a deeper lesson that reinforces everything that I have already said this morning. In his book, *Inheriting Abraham*, biblical scholar Jon D. Levenson writes about the Akeidah,

> In the paradoxical, sacrificial logic of which this text is the outstanding Jewish example, it is our ungrudging willingness to give that leads to gaining and retaining that which is most precious.[12]

The *Akeidah* teaches us that the ultimate form of giving results in retaining and gaining. Kindness is not a zero-sum game. If we learn to give of ourselves, if we invest deeply in the things that matter most to us, if we volunteer, if we contribute, if we step forward, then we are bound to receive back our investment in manifold ways.

Here at B'nai Israel, we are trying to create the conditions in which you can do just that. For more than six years, our congregation has supported a group of women who meet monthly in a class that began as a course on Wise Aging—a book by Rabbi Rachel Cowan and Dr. Linda Thal, designed to help participants make aging a good and powerful experience. We are about to start a new Wise Aging cohort, and we hope that the relationships that participants build with each other will mirror the strength and resiliency of the ones formed by the original group. We hope to start a new Adult B'nai Mitzvah program in early 2024, where participants will engage with Jewish texts and traditions, working towards a celebration of b'nai mitzvah together. We are about to conclude our Scientists in Synagogues series, and we hope to

[12] Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity & Islam,* p. 85.

transform that into an affinity group, a group of people with shared interests and passions that meets periodically to continue exploring these topics. And we hope that we can form other affinity groups, as long as there is a critical mass of interested individuals who are willing to partner with us to do the work to make it happen. These affinity groups are based on passions and interests, and we will also soon explore the opening up of new *havurot*, groups of families, couples, and individuals who gather together monthly for Shabbat and holiday dinners, social events, and other opportunities. To do this, we need your support and your participation. We need you to engage, and to take on the challenge with us of intentionally building relationships, building connections, and strengthening our sacred community together. This is the antidote to the illusion of moral decline. My challenge to you this year is to come to B'nai Israel and make more people, your people.