

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5778  
September 20, 2017  
B'nai Israel Congregation  
Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz

On the eve of Rosh Hashanah, we gather together to inaugurate the High Holy Day season, to begin the period of time during which Jews around the world gather together for days of prayer, repentance, and self-reflection. It is a time when we are told that our fate hangs in the balance, when we will either be inscribed in the Book of Life, or the Book of Death. But the Talmudic version of this is more nuanced, it includes a third book, a third category: the *beinonim*, the average ones. Neither incredibly righteous nor entirely evil, the *beinonim*, the average ones, are given the chance to atone during the ten days between now and Yom Kippur, and only then will our fate be sealed in one of the two books. I imagine that most of us, myself included, are in this category. We have some work to do in the days ahead.

I can accept that, and I will work to make the most of these Days of Awe. But there is a different, yet related issue that arises year after year, one about which I am often asked as a person of faith: How could it be that those who are righteous and good perish from the earth, while those who are wicked and rotten manage to live on in the next year? This is the question that I wish to address this evening.

Some sages and rabbis have rationalized the quandary by asserting that the righteous who perish from this world are being rewarded with early passage to Olam Haba, the World to Come, the Jewish understanding of the afterlife. But that is neither satisfying nor reasonable. Who here can say with any certainty that there is a life beyond this one that is better, more enjoyable, more desirable? And although this potential exists, I have met very few mourners who find solace in this explanation. Rather, it sounds apologetic and unfair.

The Rambam, or Maimonides, also rejected this answer and instead proffered his own. He noted that our deeds, the good and the bad, are not simply set upon a scale and measured one-to-one. Rather, the *quality* of our contributions to the world is weighed against that of our misdeeds. It is not simply a matter of quantity, but of quality. However, the only one who can accurately measure the quality is God.<sup>1</sup> As human beings, our capacity to understand the world is limited by our senses, our experiences, and by the present-day boundaries of scientific discovery. We are constantly striving to learn more, but it is unlikely that we will ever come to know everything about our universe. That is a significant aspect of the Rambam's argument—that we are not all-knowing; only God can truly determine the weight of our contributions to the world compared to the magnitude of our misdeeds. And that is why the attempt to answer the question I first posed, about why some very good people pass on from this world while others live on, is futile—we are not meant to know why some perish before others, and we may never be able to ascertain this information. It is one of the hidden matters, what last week's Torah reading, Parshat Nitzavim refers to as the *nistarot*, the concealed matters that are for God alone to comprehend, compared to the revealed matters that are for us to understand. Said differently, there are some matters that exist in a realm beyond our current capacity to comprehend.

Therein lies a profound lesson for us to learn from the Rambam's answer: that we must learn to embrace the idea that some things are beyond our human capacity to grasp, and that they might remain there forever. We cannot know if the greatness of our good deeds outweighs the magnitude of our misdeeds. And that not knowing can be crippling, it can weigh heavily upon us and make us despair. But that is a wholly unproductive response. Instead, I encourage us all to respond to the uncertainty of the world and the ambiguity of our future by trying, each and every

---

<sup>1</sup> Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Teshuvah 3:2.

day to utilize what we do know to improve ourselves and to improve the world. Strive for knowledge and seek justice, knowing that these pursuits bring about a better life for us as individuals, and a better world for all of humanity. We need not know the answer to every question in order to enjoy our lives and make this world a better place. We must simply find a way to embrace the ambiguity, accept that there are things unknown, and nevertheless work to ensure that our names are inscribed in the Book of Life, that we push against the tendency to simply be one of the *beinonim*, the average ones. This is the time to move beyond that status, even if we cannot know with any certainty that we have succeeded.

I believe that the key to all of this is to practice a sense of profound humility, to remind ourselves over these next few days and weeks that despite our achievements and accomplishments, we are but human beings. Indeed, we have been endowed with divine qualities, but those are gifts to be used for the betterment of our lives and the lives of people all over the world. Those same gifts should not allow our hubris to grow in such a way that we expect to be all-knowing creatures, to understand perfectly the complex systems of the world and its most mysterious and elusive qualities.

If we stop to notice it, we will see that what could be characterized as unknown, ambiguous, and hidden is what makes up the wondrous aspects of our universe. If we can pause to appreciate the beauty of nature, the sounds of the voices around us, and the miraculous events of our lives, then we will come to see the unknown not as an obstacle to be conquered or as a challenge with which to be reckoned. Rather, we will come to see it all with a sense of what Abraham Joshua Heschel referred to as “radical amazement,” an appreciation for wonder, and a deep sense of reverence and awe. This is the most productive response to the realization that we do not, and will not, be able to fully comprehend the intricacies of our world. We can, however,

utilize all that we do have and all that we have learned to work diligently to improve the world around us and infuse it with a spark of the Divine, as we say in Alenu, *l'taken olam b'malchut Shadai*. May these efforts cause our names to move from the Book of the *Beinonim*, the average ones, to be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life, *Sefer HaChayyim*. Rebecca and I wish you and your entire families a *shana tovah*, a year filled with health, happiness, and peace.