

Rabbi Jonathan A. Schnitzer
B'nai Israel Congregation
Rockville, Maryland

FIRST DAY OF ROSH HASHANAH
14 SEPTEMBER 2015

Shanah Tovah u'metukah – a good and sweet year to each of you – one of joy, fulfillment, hope and inner peace.

I look out at our B'nai Israel community as we celebrate Rosh Hashanah and I want to tell you as clearly and unequivocally as I can – how uplifted and grateful I am that you are here in our Synagogue today. Truth be told, you could be in other places – some decidedly far less Jewish – but for a variety of reasons – you have chosen to be at B'nai Israel – and through your presence on this special day – to affirm your identity and strengthen our congregation. In our overwhelmingly secular society which pushes more and more Jews away from a structured religious setting, the fact that you are here is for me exceptionally heartwarming and meaningful.

Beverly and I would also like to re-iterate our profound appreciation for the outpouring of affection which we experienced so keenly at the Schnitzer Silver Celebration in May. Hundreds of you were there – and it was, by any standard, an extraordinary evening which we shall long remember and cherish. We remain most humbled.

On Rosh Hashanah, our lens is broad and encompassing: “Hayom harat olam – today is the birthday of the entire world” – we say – but as we assess that world, it is not a very pretty picture:

Random, unpredictable gun violence mowing down Americans, with too few forms of reasonable control to offset the havoc and the horror –

a resurgence of deep-seated racism and the reversal of long-won civil rights for African Americans –

a festering debate on the destiny of millions of illegal immigrants, with even some calls for “deportation,” a word that should send chills down the spines of Jews –

a Presidential electoral process which has become sordid and ugly on both sides of the political divide –

and within our Jewish community, an unprecedented level of internal polarization in the context of the Iran nuclear treaty. And these examples are only on the domestic front.

If we expand our lens further geographically, the view is equally troubling:

Syrian children drowning in the Mediterranean as their families flee their war-torn homeland – while diplomats pass the blame and responsibility one to another –

ISIS and its barbarism –

the savage murders at Charlie Hebdo and the Hyper-Kasher supermarket in Paris –

child labor, female enslavement.

With our hyper-connected technology, what happens thousands of miles away is on our I-phone screen in seconds. The list of brutalities goes on and on – and there is no escape.

So: the perennial Rosh Hashanah question – even more piercing this year – what are we to do?

As always, we have to start with ourselves. By changing ourselves, there is at least the possibility that we can have an ameliorating impact on a corner of our world.

Like many of you, I, too have been reading The Road to Character, by New York Times columnist, David Brooks.

He writes at the outset: “Recently, I’ve been thinking about the differences between the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the ones you list on your résumé, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They’re the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being – whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful, what kind of relationships you formed.”

And David Brooks continues: “Most of us would say that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé virtues . . . but most of us have clearer strategies for how to achieve career success than we do for how to develop profound character.”

Interestingly enough, then, David Brooks draws on the writings of a distinguished Jewish theologian, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who posited the theory of Adam I and Adam II – Adam being the Hebrew word for “human being.”

Adam I is the external résumé type – “who wants to build, create, produce and discover things” – achieving high status and victories.

By contrast, Adam II is the more internal type – “who wants to have a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong – not only to do good but to be good. Adam II wants to love intimately, to sacrifice self in the service of others, to live in obedience to some transcendent truth, to have a cohesive inner soul that honors . . . one’s own possibilities.”

In our American value-system, we tend to extol Adam I. We give insufficient attention to Adam II.

In David Brook’s language: Adam I is loud – but the voice of Adam II is muffled . . .; the life plan of Adam I is clear, but the life plan of Adam II is fuzzy; Adam I is alert, Adam II is sleepwalking.

The Road to Character opens up to profile a diverse range of figures who discovered and activated their inner moral forces. They constructed – often with immense struggle and failures along the way – a blue-print of purpose, of consequence for themselves. They stumbled and fell. They fought inevitable shortcomings, weaknesses and fears; but they did not battle alone. They found sustenance from “family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, exemplars and for believers, from God.” They conceded their own humility – they became better than they had been – and in the end, Adam II triumphed.

As Jews, we are fortunate: we have a very specific framework which can help us on our journey to character. Over the summer while studying at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, I had the opportunity of hearing a presentation by Rabbi Arthur Green, a gifted teacher and

thinker, well-respected for his ability to communicate and synthesize the essence of Judaism – to make the compelling argument that being Jewish matters. In a wonderful, small book called Judaism's 10 Best Ideas: A Brief Guide to Seekers, Rabbi Green offers, almost as-it-were, a companion-piece to David Brook's volume. In his pithy, eminently-readable style, Rabbi Green outlines the concepts which, in his view, are central in awakening our Jewish self-awareness and our pride:

1. Simhah – feeling a sense of joy, positivism as a religious precept – in spite of the inevitable frustrations, disappointments and heartaches.

2. Tzelem Elohim – knowing that every human being is created in God's image – looks a little like God – and therefore has the innate right to dignity, respect, compassion and the expression of his or her individuality.

3. Halakhah – Walking the Path

As Jews, we are a community of “doers” - with patterns of behavior -- the Mitzvot - that translate abstract goals into tangible, specific actions.

4. Tikun Olam – Repairing the World

There are problems and challenges galore “out there” requiring our attention. We become God's partners in addressing and responding to those issues.

5. Shabbat

In our frenetic, overly-scheduled, stressful lifestyle, where we check our messages almost every minute – reclaiming Shabbat – in some 21st century form – is a supremely helpful gift of weekly re-invigoration.

6. Teshuvah – Returning

The core message of our High Holy Day season is that we can and must make amends – we can and must change and grow.

7. Torah – The People and the Book

Yes, Torah is a text – but it has endured precisely because it has been studied and interpreted by us as Jews anew in each era -- shaped by our insights and circumstances.

8. Talmud Torah

The commitment to Jewish education – Jewish literacy – must be axiomatic – for ourselves and our children – the indispensable link from one generation to the next.

9. Ehad – Hear O Israel – There is only One

Recognizing that we are part of the Jewish people who have struggled and argued with God from the beginning – who have an imperfect understanding of what God may be – but nevertheless try to see the mystery and majesty of our universe and of our own being.

And finally

10. L'Hayyim – To Life – Accepting Death but Affirming Life

To be sure, life is finite for each of us – but as Jews we have the potential of crafting sacred moments –
sacred relationships –
and
sacred actions –
that then become our enduring legacy.

Simhah – Tzelem Elohim-
Halakhah – Tikun Olam - Shabbat
Teshuvah – Torah – Talmud Torah
Ehad – and L'Hayyim –
here is our uniquely Jewish blueprint for our road to character.

At B'nai Israel, we are celebrating our 90th anniversary – a major milestone for our congregation. Our theme this year is “from Our House to Yours.” Whether in the communal setting of our Synagogue – in the more personal space of our own home – or in our community-at-large – the opportunities for activating our Jewish blueprint are abundant.

On Rosh Hashanah, when we speak so much about Hayyim – about life – it seems to me that the most important question we should be asking ourselves is not “Is life being good to me” – but rather “Am I being good to life?”

In the New Year ahead that we have all just begun together, what are you going to do?