

YOM KIPPUR SERMON: LOST IN TRANSITION, 5773
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

When asked: "What [do you feel] about helping people in general?

Are we as a society obligated to do something?"

an emerging adult, age 18-23, answers:

"I really don't think there're any good reasons, nope, nothing."

When further asked: "[I]f someone just wasn't interested in helping others...

Would that be a problem or not?"

the emerging adult responds: "No, I don't see why that would be a problem...

Because I mean is that really our duty, to help others?

Is that what we're here for? I mean, they can help themselves..."

Question: "So if someone asks for help, we don't have an obligation to them?"

Answer: "Yeah, it's up to each individual..."¹

This rather unsettling exchange is from a book called *Lost in Transition*

by Christian Smith, a professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame.

Smith led a team of researchers who conducted in-depth interviews

across the country with 230 young adults.

Another conversation in the book goes as follows:

Question: "Is it okay to break moral rules if it works to your advantage and

you can get away with it?" Answer: "Break moral rules?

I'm sorry, what do you mean by moral rules?

I would have to say in some cases, yeah, it would be okay.

It just, it would really depend what those rules were. It's on a case-by-case basis."

¹ P. 26.

The interviewers in Smith's study asked open-ended questions about right and wrong, moral dilemmas and the meaning of life.

What they found is that emerging adults have a very individualistic approach to morality, believing that morality is entirely a matter of personal opinion.²

They are uncomfortable with judging other people or imposing their values on anyone else. Here is how one young man put it:

"What makes something right?...I guess [it's] how I feel about it, but different people feel different ways, so I couldn't speak on behalf of anyone else..."³

A consequence of this moral individualism is a belief that everyone is responsible for themselves – so there is no obligation to help other people in need.

In response to the interviewer's question about whether we have a duty to help others, another young adult said:

"I don't ever stop when I see somebody on the side of the road... Maybe if someone is burning in the car, you should try to pull them out..."

According to Smith, one of the problems for these young adults is that they do not possess the moral reasoning skills to differentiate between how they feel about an issue and what might be a universal value that would apply to all human beings.⁴

34 percent of those interviewed "said *they simply did not know what makes anything morally right or wrong*."⁵

² P. 21.

³ P. 22.

⁴ Pp. 33, 36-7.

⁵ P. 36.

When they were asked how they would make a moral choice,
“the most frequently chosen answer...
was ‘*doing what would make you feel happy.*’”⁶

Indeed, 72 per cent “describe their moral knowledge and behaviors
as being based upon ‘instinct.’”⁷

Perhaps even more surprising, when asked to describe a moral dilemma
they had faced, two-thirds of the young people
either couldn’t answer the question or described problems
that are not moral at all,
like whether they could afford to rent a certain apartment or
whether they had enough quarters to feed the meter at a parking spot.⁸

One example:

“Well...just today, this cat I’d gotten recently,
it started...to use a...place that’s not the litter box.
I’ve been cleaning it up...but she seems to keep going there.
So...I’m thinking of getting a second litter box to give her.”⁹

Now, I am not suggesting that ALL young adults fit this description.
Nor am I or the author of this study suggesting that this is THEIR fault.
In fact, what *Lost in Transition* demonstrates is that WE, the older generation
and society in general, have done a pretty lousy job
of educating our youth in moral matters.

⁶ Pp. 50-1.

⁷ P. 52.

⁸ Pp. 56-7.

⁹ P. 57.

As the Reform movement seeks to figure out how we can be relevant in the 21st century and, in particular, how we can be relevant to the next generation, I would like to suggest that we take on this job -- the job of teaching our young folks what kinds of moral obligations we have to one another.

After all, how can we hope to live in a humane, just society if each of us is primarily worried about making ourselves happy without concern for the common good?

Judaism emerged from just such a world in which morality was relative -- each god in a polytheistic society had his or her own demands.

By declaring that there IS only ONE God,

Judaism affirmed that there is one moral code for everyone.

And that moral code is fully based on respecting our fellow human beings and looking out for each other.

Indeed, when asked what the essence of Judaism was,

Rabbi Hillel responded: "What is hateful to you, do not do to any other, that is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary."

That is Rabbi Hillel's twist on the Golden Rule, which is placed right in the middle of the Torah

The Golden Rule, "Love your neighbor as yourself,"

is part of the Holiness Code, one of our Torah readings for Yom Kippur.

It reminds us to care for the stranger,
because we were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Judaism offers us a clear moral compass that is an essential counterweight
to the moral drift exemplified by *Lost in Transition*.

According to author Christian Smith, modern society is to blame
for this current sad state of affairs.

For example, our public schools are so focused on teaching
to standardized tests they rarely have time to engage in discussions
about moral conflicts and dilemmas.

Then, of course, there is the issue of globalization and the Internet.

As Smith explains:

“...this cohort of young people has exponentially more information...
at its fingertips than any generation before.

This mass of information...is also less filtered and evaluated
by institutional gatekeepers – book editors and news executives,
people who might guarantee some level of accuracy, significance, and value –
than it ever was in the past...most emerging adults today are inundated
with more competing information, narratives, and truth claims
than any person could possibly assimilate, assess, and synthesize...

Making good sense of it all can be very difficult, if not impossible –
especially when adult institutions, like families, schools, and congregations,
are not providing youth with the kind of critical reasoning skills needed
to do that well.¹⁰

¹⁰ pp. 63-4.

There is also the problem of political disengagement among many young folks. The dysfunction of our government institutions has led to cynicism and apathy when it comes to the public square.

As Smith writes: “The vast majority of the emerging adults we interviewed remain highly civically and politically disengaged, uninformed, and distrustful. Most in fact feel disempowered, apathetic, and sometimes even despairing when it comes to the larger social, civic, and political world beyond their own private lives...few emerging adults feel equipped to participate confidently and constructively in public, civic, or political life.”¹¹

Another issue is that words like “duty” and “responsibility” strike emerging adults as “vaguely coercive or puritanical... Society [for them] is not about citizens exercising responsibilities to decide collectively for the common good.

It is about individuals deciding whatever they want for themselves and hopefully not having anyone else get in the way.”¹²

Clearly, we need to make words like “responsibility” valuable again. Once upon a time, for example, people came to religious services, not only for their own benefit, but also to make sure there was a minyan for people to recite the Mourners’ Kaddish.

For all that we may criticize about the Orthodox community, when someone is ill or when someone has a baby, the community is right there to support, mourn, or rejoice with them.

¹¹ pp. 195-6, 216.

¹² P. 221.

One of the prayers we recite every morning
is the Talmud's list of the obligations that are without measure:

“Honoring one's father and mother,
engaging in deeds of compassion,
arriving early for study, morning and evening,
dealing graciously with guests, visiting the sick,
providing for the wedding couple,
accompanying the dead for burial,
being devoted in prayer,
and making peace among all people.

But the study of Torah encompasses them all.”

Many people in our own congregation fulfill these responsibilities.

But just think about what kind of society we could build

if more folks felt accountable for performing

these essential acts of spiritual enrichment and loving-kindness.

Think about what a warm, vibrant, and welcoming community

we could have right here in Riverside, right here at Temple Beth El.

And we would be setting such a terrific example for our

youth and young adults. Because, if they could see more older adults

lighting candles on Shabbat, attending services with focus and intention,

pursuing Torah study, participating in shivah minyans,

feeding the homeless, they would recognize that these are the kind of mitzvot

that are important to creating and maintaining community,

that place us on a correct moral path, and that make us proud to be Jewish.

Practicing these mitzvot would go a long way towards countering the instant gratification so valued in our current society and so encouraged by all our technological communications— from instant messaging, to texting, to Google, to Facebook.

Practicing these mitzvot would give us and our children more real face-to-face time with each other – which would promote greater compassion, understanding, and in-depth relationships.

It would give us the opportunity to savor our time and our experiences, which develops gratitude for what we are blessed to have.

Practicing these mitzvot would remind us that there are moral guidelines that have been refined by our tradition over the course of thousands of years and that make us kinder, gentler people.

So let us embrace the wisdom of our foreparents.

As we chant the V'Ahavta, let us pledge to really teach the words of the Torah to our children.

When we hear Leviticus chanted tomorrow, let us take the Golden Rule to heart.

As we move onto the Confession of Our Sins, let us think about the sin of neglecting to instill a moral compass in those who come after us, a moral compass so readily available in our tradition.

Let us not leave the next generation Lost in Transition.