

## **Reclaiming and Uplifting the Goodness of Human beings**

**Rosh Hashanah Morning, 2018, 5779**

**I wish to give you a public service warning: I submitted this sermon to the Sermon Association of America, which does ratings like the Motion Picture Association. This sermon is not rated PG, it has been rated R, as it will contain some violent images that young people should not be exposed to. I appealed the decision. I said they hear and see these things everyday on social media, television and in the world, they encounter. I got a new rating by the rabbi's organization—HH – PG 13.**

**Today, is considered the birthday of the world. At the core of our new year celebration is reflecting on our lives and the world we live in. My sense is that many of us are having some challenge in grappling with both questions. What is it we are celebrating? Are we proud of what we have become, individually and collectively? Have we grown in compassion, understanding, thoughtfulness, as individuals and as a culture – are we celebrating the gifts we do have in our lives, the people who love us, the acts of goodness that we perform, the blessings we possess.**

**I want to give you two images to consider, the first. During the siege of Sarajevo, which was longer than the siege of Stalingrad, on May 28, 1992 a bomb was shot into the middle of the city and 22 people were killed. Just a few months ago, I stood on the spot where the mortar had destroyed these innocent lives. It was during that time that I learned about Vedran Smailovic, principal cellist of the Sarajevo Opera Orchestra. After the bombing of a food line, he came out every day at the time and site of the shelling and played on his cello, Albinoni's *Adagio in G Minor*. This slow and solemn piece brought comfort and hope to all who heard Smailovic play at that site and**

throughout Sarajevo. What made him do this act of goodness, we don't really know. What gives people the ability to act with courage, we study and try to understand, with no definitive answers. As one friend of his wrote about him: "Most news coverage is a quick sweep of dead bodies. This was different. I know how brave he was to do this alone...just one person all by himself making a difference in a dangerous world."

The second image. It had been a long and demanding day. I decided to relax by watching a little television. Faced with lots of choices, I considered Game of Thrones, The Wire and Breaking Bad and finally settled in looking at Criminal Minds. After a few minutes, I realized that I was watching another show about serial killers and horrific crimes. Yes, these shows all make some valuable points about human nature and can be intriguing but at their essence they are filled with stories of the bestiality of some human beings. So, reluctantly I turned on the 10:00 news. Another act of violence on Bart, a shooting on Highway 80, the latest in the Peyton place events of DC, a major accident on a highway, another natural disaster, with the only relaxing part being the weather and sports reports. That nearly ended my fascination with the nightly news, but not quite. The straw that broke the camel back, was the recent news story in SF a man who had been beheaded and his head was found in his fish tank. The news stations, television programs, movies continue to tell horrific stories, for one reason only, many of us like them.

Why do we seem to much more interested in story number 2? Is it human nature to look at all that is wrong and be grateful that it is not happening to us? Are stories of goodness and courage, not exciting enough for us? I find it fascinating that every time there is another tragic mass shooting, we are obsessed with knowing they why?

How did we ever reach this point? Look at the beginning of our Torah. Beautiful story of creation, most days ending with and God saw that it

was good. Creation is good. We move ahead a few chapters – Adam and Eve. God says: “Now that they have become like one of us, knowing good and bad” and then we know Adam and Eve fall to temptation and are banished. They are mortal. And then jump ahead just a few more chapters to the Cain and Abel story. “And when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him. Quite a story for the first two brothers. Consider this if I were to ask you to write a Torah, is this the story you would tell about the first brothers?

So, as we know these themes of violence, cruelty, insensitivity, meanness have been around from the beginning. In the text before Cain kills Abel, he has a conversation with God. God says to Cain: Yes, you have the urge. You can be its master. This is the same theme as the Adam and Eve story who also gave into temptation.

Right away, we are at one of the core teachings of Judaism. Yes, there is good and evil. Yes, each human being possesses the potential for both. Yes, it is hard to overcome anger, or being victimized, or having had an injustice done towards you. Yes, it is hard not to be obsessed with a culture of violence and meanness. Yet what Judaism constantly reminds us of is the choice is our responsibility. We do not have to succumb the vitriol that surrounds us. We do not have to give in to making other demons. We can control our emotions and use them for good. However, like so many other aspects of life, it is much easier to say than to do. It is especially challenging in these turbulent times, as we begin the new year, 5779.

However, this is the quintessential question that we all need to consider: How am I going to view the world, other people, myself? Am I really going to believe that the people who surround me are demonic in some way, am I going to let the horrors shown on some television shows or movies define our world, am I going to let myself give in to a culture of disrespect, name calling, and lacks empathy? Or am I going to chooses a life that sees all the good around me. We can

spend more time learning about and affirming the people we all know who do acts of kindness every day, the movies that show the heroic part of the human experience, a culture where people are respectful, thoughtful and compassionate.

Judaism understands us. It gives us this choice but really requires one answer. That is to choose the good. Otherwise, we become cynical and bitter unable to celebrate the beauty and magic of the creation of our world, and our own creation.

At the end of Genesis 5 and then In Genesis 6, we read that the world has become corrupt and filled with lawlessness. This had been going on for ten generations. God is angry and wants to destroy this beautiful creation. The earth was filled with corruption and evil. Human beings were treating each other terribly. God regretted the decision to ever create us...when God saw how abusive we were to each other and to the world.

Noah, a man described as righteous and good in his age and God asks him to build an ark so that life can be perpetuated. We know little about Noah, except this from the text: In Genesis 6:1, it says "*Noach ish tzadik tamim haya b'dorotav -- et ha-elohim hithalech noach*" "Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age; Noah walked with God...The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with Hamas, lawlessness...." What does righteous mean? He was a good and just person. He had integrity.

There was a historic rabbinic debate over the adjectives describing Noah, was he only a good and a moral voice in a time in his generation of corruption. How would he have been in other ages where people lived by ethical guidelines and values? One rabbinic sage commented that in that kind of time, Noah would have been like many others. However, another sage points out that being just and having integrity in troubled times is even more difficult when the

world is filled with corruption. Thus, we should hold Noah in even higher regard.

Rashi, the great medieval commentator on the Bible, goes on to say more in his discussion comparing Noah to Abraham. For Abraham, as told in Genesis 17, was "blameless." God did not have to walk with Abraham. Abraham was so "righteous," so "perfect," that the Torah even states there that God had no need to walk with Abraham. Rather, Abraham walked before God. In contrast, other rabbis say that "perfection" is not the standard each person, each man and woman, must meet. These rabbis believe that if Noah, even in a wicked generation was righteous, how much more so would he have been had he lived in a generation of righteous people. And note that Noah, a man described as "good in his generation," is deemed worthy by God and it is he whom God instructs to build an ark so that life can be preserved, perpetuated.

What matters here is that Noah was a good person in his time. That is all any of us can be. We are alive now, not 100 years ago, not 100 years from now. All we can do is to find way be just, hold on to values that uplift, speak out for what we see is wrong, build our own arks for those in need of haven, the vulnerable, the stranger, the poor, the dispossessed. We can only live in the world that we are born into. We can only play with the cards that are dealt to us. It is not illness, or loss of loved ones that break the human spirit rather it is the belligerent and insensitive behavior of so many that can make us feel hopeless and morally adrift.

I am tired, emotionally and spiritually worn out by all the stories that demean who most of us are. I yearn for stories about people striving to be a Noah, in our times, creating lifesaving arks for ourselves and others. And our world is filled with those stories, we just don't tell them. There are men and women in each age who have showed moral courage in how they live and have lived with integrity.

Just a few weeks ago, we lost a man who embodied what it means to be good and just in his age, John McCain. Why are so many American bereft by his loss, why did two former opponents and presidents speak so eloquently at his funeral, why has his death been a source of so many. It is not about his policies. Some deeply resonated to his political views, many did not. We mourned him because he represented the best of public service. We mourn him because he was goodness, decency, his sense of honor and loyalty. Going back to Hanoi, he chose to stay in horrific conditions, when his father's status could have led to an earlier release. However, his principles refused to allow him to go home until those who rightfully should have gone home before he did. We mourn the loss of a man who in the 2008 campaign had an incident when he defended his opponent Obama. "I can't trust Obama. I have read about him, and he's not, um, he's an Arab," a woman said to McCain at a town hall meeting in Lakeville, Minnesota in October 2008.

McCain grabbed the microphone from her, cutting her off. "No, ma'am," he said. "He's a decent family man [and] citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with him on fundamental issues, and that's what the campaign's all about." If he can do that on the national stage in the midst of a presidential election, can we not do it when we hear our friends or family speak about others in a demeaning way?

We mourn the loss of a man who out of conviction broke from his party. He was all in for immigration reform.

We mourn the loss of man who voted his conscience, in what turned out to be his last vote on the Senate floor, a deciding vote, a thumbs down vote to repeal Obama care.

What Americans are mourning is a deep commitment to America, his core understanding that political life is about service, his deep

foundation of values, his willingness to cross party lines as best exemplified in the VP candidate he really wanted in 2008, Joe Lieberman.

We are mourning the loss of a man with many human flaws but someone we knew, whatever our political convictions might be, the he acted with decency and was doing his best not for McCain but in what he thought was right for America.

Noah and John McCain separated by thousands of years but each a person of integrity. They provide us with a foundation and an inspiration of who and what we can be in this new year.

Integrity, a word, a concept we all understand and can identify it but so hard to live by its inherent values. Integrity means acting in a just and compassionate way on a consistent basis. Integrity is holding oneself accountable for one's own actions. Integrity is accepting one's flaws and yet to never stop striving to live by principles that affirm our lives and those around us.

Women and men throughout the ages have taught us that, we can choose to be like Noah or McCain, heroes in daily life. We can choose to share with each other the great stories about teachers, social workers, fire fighters, regular people like you and me, who do positive acts that really should shape the narrative of our time. We can choose to take responsibility and engage in ways that will reshape our world in a positive way. We can choose to see what is sacred in ourselves and others. We can choose to speak out for injustice wherever and whenever it takes place. We can choose not to take on the victim role and retreat from a world that we may not like, but rather use this opportunity to get more involved in our communities. We can choose acts of kindness every day, a call, an email, a kind word that will mean a great deal to someone else. We can choose to build up, to create, to believe in the ultimate goodness of human beings and humanity.

**The late Rabbi Schneerson challenged us to look both inward and outward: If you see what needs to be repaired in the world and how to repair it, then you have found a piece of the world that God has left for you to complete. But if you only see what is wrong and that which is ugly, then it is you, yourself that needs repair.**

**There is an urgent call, that the Shofar reminds us of, to reclaim the goodness in this world. It is urgent. It is out of integrity, that we are motivated to speak out against anyone, our neighbors or our leaders who try to tear down the greatness of the human spirit. As has been said by many: “Integrity is choosing your thoughts and actions based on values rather than personal gain.” “Wisdom is knowing the right path to take. Integrity is taking it.” We act of integrity when we believe that our voices matter, and they do: We can call or write the networks and let them know how abhorrent we find their violent shows. We can let our local television and radio shows to stop telling us over and over about all the negative but find time to uplift the positive. We can contact our elected leaders with one clear message: Stop the negative rhetoric, stop demeaning others, some giving messages about how about that belittle our humanity. Will these acts make a difference, I don’t know? What I do know, if we don’t do it, change will never be possible.**

**That is what RH, the birthday of the world celebrates. It is about uplifting and letting the women and men who possess integrity and are doing their best to reclaim all that is positive in the world. It is about focusing on them not the people who demonstrate little or no integrity and want us to perceive other people as out to hurt us.**

**I found John McCain’s farewell letter deeply moving. I was profoundly moved by the Hemingway quote that shaped his life: “Today is only one day in all the days that will ever be. But what will happen in all the other days that ever come can depend on what you do today,” (Ernest Hemingway, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*). That is a**



core Jewish value, what I do today, shapes me, my future and the world around me.

I try to be deeply realistic and optimistic. Human beings are not perfect. We are flawed like Noah or Senator McCain. All we can do is to try our best and not let the flaws define us. Like Noah had a partnership with God and McCain had many partners, we need partners who share our values and help to uplift what each of us possesses to reclaim a culture of respect and decency. I try not to let the narrative of negativity that dominates our culture erode my soul or beliefs. I want us to reclaim a narrative about the human experience and the world that uplifts all the good that is taking place, each day.

Here is my version of the creation story for today:

This is the first day of the New Year, and it is good.

This day matters greatly and what I make of it, and it will be good.

This day, I can say no to negative stories especially ones that erode our souls, and it will be good.

This day I can contribute something positive, and it will be good.

This day I can choose to see the goodness in myself, my loved ones and in the world around me. And it will be good.

This day, I can choose to learn more about the good people and their stories and ask our media to cover these stories.

This day, I can be a good and just person in my time, in my world, and it will be good.

This day I can take one more step to living a life of integrity. And it will be good.

**This day I can choose life and do my best to create an ark of compassion, humanity and love that has room for everyone, and it will be good.**

**And it can be good, if we crave it and work towards it. And it will be good.**

**Rabbi Lee Bycel**

