**EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2017**

**Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley**

**Rabbi Niles Goldstein**

*B’ruchim ha-ba’im b’shem Adonai—*

blessed are each & every one of you

who have come to this sacred space

at this most holy of times;

I wish each & every one of you a Shanah Tovah,

a happy & healthy New Year.//

It is such an honor & a privilege to be your rabbi.//

I have spent much of the past 3 months

getting to know you,

both individually & in small gatherings,

& I can tell you—

& I know that I speak for Carolyn as well—

that all of my early assessments about CBS

have proven to be accurate:

You are a warm, welcoming, intellectually curious,

& down-to-earth congregation,

& I am very, very grateful that you have chosen me

as your new spiritual leader.//

This has been a time of great transition in my life:

I have moved, along with Carolyn,

from the Midwest to the West Coast;

from a major city to a small town;

from relative anonymity

to serving again in a more public role.//

These transitions are not without their challenges,

but we remain excited, &, slowly but surely,

we feel more & more settled in our new home—

& with our new family.//

As T.S. Eliot writes, “Every end is a beginning,

& every beginning an end;

the end is where we start from.”//

I can’t think of any community other than CBS

with whom I would want to begin this next chapter

in my personal & rabbinic journey.//

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During the very short time I’ve been in Napa,

this country has been shaken by a number

of troubling events:

the violence & racism in Charlottesville,

the destruction of hurricanes Harvey & Irma,

the renewed nuclear threat from North Korea.//

But I want to go back a little further tonight,

to an event that is *equally* troubling to many.//

It has been almost a year

since our last presidential election,

& our country is more polarized than ever before.//

Some of us are still dumbstruck by what happened,

by the sort of person who got elected

as commander-in-chief & leader of the Free World.//

As a result,

*leadership* is on the minds of a great many people across our nation & throughout the world.//

We are not alone in our concern

about what constitutes authentic leadership—

in other countries overseas,

from the UK & Europe

to the Philippines & Malaysia,

heads of state have been elected who seem to lack

many of the fundamental qualities

that have, historically, come to define a person

of integrity & moral character.//

Thoughtfulness, maturity, compassion, wisdom—

these are just a few of the qualities

that many of us find absent

in so many of today’s leaders.//

But there is another quality,

one from which most of the others emerge,

that I think is even *more* absent

from the so-called leaders around us—*humility*.//

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Humility is a moral &, I believe, a *spiritual* virtue

that has been present in great leaders

since antiquity.//

While humility is a very rare quality

in modern-day politicians & presidents,

it is *embedded* in the Jewish prophetic tradition

in ways that are as striking as they are instructive.//

As we begin these Days of Awe together tonight,

this 10-day period of prayer & introspection

that is meant to *humble* as well as transform us,

let’s take a look at the example of *Mose*s,

perhaps the greatest biblical prophet of them all.//

When Moses encounters God thru a burning bush

on Mount Horeb,

he is filled with a sense of awe & humility.//

He takes off his sandals

& he listens intently to what God has to say.//

God has marked well the plight of the Israelites

in Egypt & has heeded their outcry;

God is mindful of their sufferings;

God will rescue them from their bondage

& bring them to a land flowing with milk & honey—

but God needs a human surrogate.//

God says to Moses:

“Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh,

& you shall free My people, the Israelites,

from Egypt.”//

Can you imagine what an enormous ego-trip

this must have been for a simple shepherd,

a man plucked from obscurity

to lead his people,

in almost messianic fashion,

from slavery to freedom?//

Who wouldn’t have jumped at the chance

for such glory & accolade?//

But rather than eagerly accepting his “nomination,”

Moses instead *questions* God’s decision:

“Who am I,” he asks, “that I should go to Pharaoh

& free the Israelites from Egypt?”//

Moses’s response is not unheard of in the Bible.//

The prophet Jonah,

who we will read on Yom Kippur afternoon,

*also* resists the divine call to lead—

as does the prophet Jeremiah.//

But there is a difference;

whereas Jonah & Jeremiah resist the call

because they don’t want to bear the burden

& feeling of isolation

that comes with being a leader,

Moses expresses doubt about his own *worthiness*.//

When called by God,

Moses doesn’t question the order—

he questions *himself*.//

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In many ways, Moses serves as a paradigm

for what constitutes an authentic leader

in the biblical tradition—

& *humility* lies at the core of his being.//

There are other examples:

for instance, Abraham,

who boldly challenges God’s judgment

& capacity for mercy

during the Sodom & Gomorrah episode,

says about himself elsewhere,

“I am but dust and ashes.”//

And David, who defeats a giant,

commands an army, & rules an empire,

exclaims with dramatic & stark self-deprecation,

“I am a worm, less than human.”//

Abraham and David, like all humanity,

are born in the image of God.//

Yet they, like Moses,

distinguish themselves from most other people

in the way that they *perceive* themselves.//

While they are patriarchs, kings, & prophets,

they are also acutely aware of *where* they stand

& *who* they are:

flesh-and-blood creatures bound by limitations.//

This self-perception, grounded in humility

& indicative of character,

is found in other stories & thru other teachings—

and it is not limited to luminaries.//

Look at Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa,

an important Hasidic master

from 18th century Poland.//

He taught that all people should dress

in clothing that has two pockets,

with a note in each pocket,

so that we can reach into one or the other,

depending on our need.//

When we feel low, disconsolate, or weary,

we should reach into the right pocket

& pull out the slip of paper that reads,

“For *my* sake the world was created.”//

But when we feel high & mighty,

confident & secure,

we should take out the slip in the left pocket

that reads, “I am but dust and ashes.”//

All of us are mortal—and yet, all of us are *also* divinely exalted.//

When we’ve been brought low,

we should remind ourselves

that we are images of God.//

When we feel on top of the world,

we should remember

that we will all eventually die.//

This teaching urges us to see

the *duality* of our being

rather than a dichotomy in it.//

And it suggests that such a perspective

will lead to balance & inner peace,

protecting us

from the dangers of self-destructiveness

*and* the seductions of self-worship.//

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The word “humility” derives from the Latin root

*humus*, meaning earth or ground.//

It is something low—or that lowers us.//

Think of the practice of “sitting shivah,”

when Jews will often sit on cushions or stools

on the floor in a house of mourning.//

By taking us down, humility also “grounds” us;

in making us *descend*, humility anchors our souls.//

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There is a concept in Kabbalah called

*yeridah lifney ha-aliyah*,

“descent before ascent.”//

For the Jewish mystics, a journey down

into our existential muck & mire

is viewed as a sacred rite of passage.//

When we encounter a challenge—

whether it is a charge to face Pharaoh,

or, in more contemporary terms,

a divorce, the loss of a job,

or the death of a loved one—

we can either let it cripple us

or humbly seek its lessons & move forward.//

Descent is only the preparation for ascent.//

In the Torah, Egypt—

geographically lower than the land of Canaan—

often serves as a *metaphor* for that descent.//

A famine drives Abraham there;

Joseph, thrown into a pit by his jealous brothers,

is taken there by Midianite traders;

and Moses is born in & must return to Egypt,

a land of pain & suffering for his people.//

The mystics reread the word *mitzraim*

not as the historical Egypt,

but as “straits” (*metzarim*), obstacles & ordeals

that must be overcome.//

Abraham leaves Egypt for the land of milk & honey

& sets into motion the birth of a nation;

Moses leaves it for the wilderness of Sinai

& the theophany of the burning bush;

even Joseph, who lives out his life in Egyptian exile, has his bones gathered

& “taken up” with the Israelites during their exodus from the land of bondage to the Promised Land.//

All 3 figures, in different ways,

are ultimately triumphant

over their respective *metzarim*.//

Their experiences of descent are not permanent;

their challenges don’t paralyze their souls—

they *elevate* them.//

As a consequence, Abraham, Moses, & Joseph

transform into great leaders.//

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As the idea of *yeridah*, descent, implies,

humility is not about self-denigration,

but self-*definition*.//

How we choose to assess our abilities

& respond to life’s challenges

largely determines our characters.//

When we find ourselves traveling

thru our own “Egypt,” will we succumb to fear,

anxiety, & despair,

or will we instead submit our souls

to the higher power guiding our steps?//

It is vitally important to know our capabilities—

but it is equally essential that we understand

our human limitations.//

A person whose ego & narcissism gets in the way

will never reach this level of maturity & growth.//

Humility is not about giving up, but giving *over*;

it is about choosing to accept our limitations

& then “bowing” before the Transcendent reality

that guides our lives & anchors our souls.//

While this may be a countercultural idea today,

it is certainly not a new one.//

The Abrahamic faith traditions *all* extol the significance of humble submission.//

Judaism talks about putting on the “yoke”

of God’s sovereignty;

Christianity tells its adherents to bear the weight

of the cross on their shoulders;

Islam, whose very name means “submission,”

urges its practitioners to humbly bend their wills

to the will of God.//

While each one of us possesses a spark of the divine within our souls,

we are also made from dust & ashes.//

The truly humble person, & the authentic *leader*,

knows that while human beings are capable

of great actions & monumental achievements,

we can never do it alone—

we need the support of others, the love of family

& friends, the reality of a God who guides our steps.//

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In the eyes of most biblical commentators,

Moses is a man of strength & purpose,

a leader of exceptional, even singular character—

and his *humility* is the reason.//

We see this same trait in many of *secular* history’s

great leaders as well,

& I’ll mention just 2 of them—

George Washington & David Ben Gurion.//

Both men were the founding leaders of nations,

the United States and the State of Israel.//

Both faced huge challenges,

politically as well as militarily.//

Through determination, strategic thinking,

& the support of others,

Washington & Ben Gurion were both victorious

& achieved their goals.//

Yet neither man let his victories & achievements

go to his head.//

Washington rejected a third term as president;

he didn’t want the U.S. to mirror the monarchies

that his people had fled.//

Ben Gurion walked away from political life

& spent his final years writing

and living in a modest home on a kibbutz

in the desert.//

When presented with the opportunity to “cash in”

on their accomplishments,

both men rejected self-aggrandizement

in favor of selflessness & humility.//

Can you imagine this happening *today?*//

Can you picture today’s political leaders

truly serving their citizens

rather than themselves & their careers?//

Can you see them actually passing up

on the perks of their positions,

when they are in office & after they leave?//

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Our religious tradition places the bar on character

very high for our leaders as well as for us.//

And there is a rich history of men & women,

famous & not-so-famous,

who have lived lives of grace & modesty

& who have served as models for the rest of us.//

Now it is our turn.//

*Characte*r is at the heart of the Days of Awe

that have just begun.//

Rosh Hashanah &, next week, Yom Kippur—

thru their rites, rituals, & prayers—

are meant to humble us,

but *only* in order to build us up, to improve us,

to make us better people, morally & spiritually.//

At its core, Judaism is a *countercultural* religion

& way of life;

it introduced monotheism to an idolatrous world,

& today it impels us,

especially during the Days of Awe,

to *reject* contemporary trends & mores

that encourage self-centeredness & narcissism

& instead pursue lives of humility, selflessness,

& service to others.//

That is our challenge & our charge;

that is our mission;

that is our calling as a sacred community

as we begin this new year.//

Let us, together,

honor our past by building an honorable future;

let us practice *tikkun olam*,

& focus, not only on fixing a fractured world,

but on repairing, & improving, the broken pieces

that reside within each & every one of us.//

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May it be God’s will.