

It is Time to Recalibrate

Rosh Hashanah Sermon, October 3, 2016

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Decades from now, we will look back to the year 5776, or 2016, and we will remember. We will remember the Syrian Refugee Crisis. We will remember the Black Lives Matter movement. We will certainly remember this election season and we will remember the intensity of our emotions on whatever side of these issues and world crisis' we stood. And when future generations ask us how we responded to the cries and the debates, we will remember.

I remember when I first saw this picture: <http://stories.unhcr.org/syrian-refugees-lebanon-p1194.html>

I sat at my desk for a few minutes, contemplating carrying my daughter in my arms for miles on end, not knowing if I would have food to feed her when she started to cry. I could feel the weight of Adi and Lev in my arms from that morning, and I was paralyzed by the thought of having to flee from my home with my young children. And then I closed my internet browser and started responding to emails.

I remember when I opened up facebook one evening and saw this: <http://globalnews.ca/news/2816652/the-woman-in-the-dress-black-lives-matter-protest-photo-hailed-as-iconic/>

I wondered why she was being arrested. I felt proud of this young black woman, who had the courage to stand her ground, amidst continuing racial tensions in our country. For a couple of minutes, I pondered how I could advocate for and participate in a real dialogue about race relations, and then I turned off my phone and went to sleep.

We all responded to these images differently this year. And I'm guessing for many of us, our hearts ached but our feet did not move very far. We became overwhelmed, we did not know how to respond and we become paralyzed. We are human, we are imperfect, and that is exactly why we come together every year for these days of awe, to acknowledge our imperfections. We are here today to begin to ask for forgiveness for the litany of mistakes that we made this past year. But more importantly, we stand here together searching for ways to bring more wholeness to this world, a world filled with imperfect people, just like ourselves.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, a great Talmudic scholar and one of the fathers of the Mussar movement taught, "At first I tried to change the world and failed. Then I tried to change my city and failed. Then I tried to change my family and failed. Finally I tried to change myself and then I was able to change the world." (Mussar Institute, sermon prompts) Rabbi Salanter teaches that change begins deep within ourselves, we must start with the person whom we know the best. When change begins within our bodies and souls, it permeates into our daily interactions with others, and ultimately it changes how we

interact with the world. So the question this morning is, how do we initiate change within ourselves? Let me share with you one ancient source that Jews have practiced for centuries, but that our community is just beginning to dip our toes into. This agent of change is called Mussar, and many individuals in the Jewish world and beyond have taken on the practice of Mussar in order to change themselves, so they can ultimately become agents of change in our world. I could give you a lecture on the history of Mussar and explain what it is, but I think it will be more fun for us to watch a clip of this brief video on Mussar. (Thank you to Jordan Magidson, our director of Education for sharing this video with me and many of our students)

<http://www.letitripple.org/films/>

1:17-4:50

Now that you know what Mussar is, your task in this new year is to identify your spiritual curriculum and attempt to work on one aspect of it. There are many ways to work on your own character traits. The first *and most compelling* I'm sure, is to join my Mussar group beginning at the end of this month on Thursday mornings at 9:30am. Together we will study 9 *middot*, 9 values including humility, patience, order, equanimity, honor, truth, moderation, responsibility and trust. We will practice these traits and we will journal and reflect on our practice in community with one another. Research shows that if you attempt to make change with the support of others, you are much more likely to succeed than if you try to do it alone. If you are unable to study in community with us, read *Every Day Holiness*, by Alan Morinis which will provide you with a path to practice Mussar on your own. You will learn the different stages of Mussar practice; including sensitivity, self-restraint and transformation and you will notice opportunities for change in your life as you become accustomed to these stages. And even more simply, print out the periodic table of character strengths and reflect and discuss them with those you love, when you sit down for breakfast or dinner together, or when you're in the car driving from one place to the next. Replace "how was your day," with "how did you experience gratitude today? Or "how did you practice patience on your drive down mopak this morning?" and I promise the conversation will flow from there. If interest arises from our community, more Mussar groups will begin in the spring.

In response to the disturbing news we read and experience every day throughout our world, Tiffany Schlain, the woman who we just met, the founder of the non-for profit organization and film studio, Let It Ripple, writes, "it's becoming so clear that it's time to recalibrate and revisit some fundamental questions that humans have been asking since the beginning of time: what kind of people do we want to be? What values do we want to bring to the world -- as individuals and as a society? How do we ensure that what we are putting out reflects the best outcomes not just for us but for the world as a whole? Whether we're talking about company and corporate values, neuroscience, politics, ...our constant "busyness", at the core we're really talking about the same thing: strengthening our character." (Article cited below)

Schlain encourages us to flex our moral muscles, through Mussar. Mussar encompasses many different practices that can help us respond to the crisis' in our world, by building stronger relationships with our neighbors, reflecting on our own lives and strengthening our internal moral compasses.

The irony of working on ourselves, is that if we don't, life will remind us that we should have, by providing us with personal challenges that speak directly to our weaknesses, life has a way of pushing our buttons. I'm not talking about medical diagnosis, or even the types of tests you take in school or in your professional lives. I'm talking about moral and spiritual tests. Have you ever found yourself talking about someone negatively and then all of a sudden you run into them the next day. Life is literally giving you an opportunity to apologize by treating them with respect and dignity, how do you respond? "It is said that Abraham faced ten tests in his life. Acknowledged as the master of the soul-trait of loving-kindness, none of his tests focused on loving-kindness. Rather he was tested on the soul-trait of strength, which is traditionally set opposite and complementary to loving-kindness." (p. 249, Morinis) Life provides us with tests every day, Mussar practice prepares us for these tests, and once we "pass" a test, we find another aspect of our personal curriculum sneak up on us. This is the lifelong spiritual path that we all walk, let us walk it together this year.

It is time to re-calibrate our souls so that we are able to respond, rather than be paralyzed by the news we experience every day. Our world is crying out for a response from each and every one of us. Will we respond with kindness, moderation and generosity or will we continue to pretend that we cannot hear the call? Will we offer curiosity, humility and patience, or will we succumb to our weaknesses, despite our desire to strengthen and improve ourselves?

This past week I spoke with my friend Rabbi Rachel Grant Meyer, who works for the Hebrew immigrant aid society. I asked her how as individuals, we can each respond to the refugee crisis we are facing today. Here is what she said, "We become so overwhelmed by the magnitude of the crisis – each individual crisis the Darfuri refugees, Syrian refugees and what they then add up to; 65 million displaced people worldwide – of whom 21.3 million are refugees– that we become paralyzed. But what if we remember that they are individuals – like Aylan Kurdi, the young boy whose body washed up on a Turkish beach last September – who, if we did take action, perhaps by signing a petition, perhaps donating money or food, other children like him could be saved?"

Rabbi Grant Meyer reminded me that our news media provides us with these pictures and these individual stories, not to paralyze us, but rather to help us remember that when we talk about "refugees" we are talking about millions of individual people, moms and dads, aunts and uncles, sons and daughters. These are people you and I could be in relationship with if we chose to do so, they are our neighbors moving into apartments across the street. And when we struggle with the racial tensions mounting in our society, we do not have to travel very far to participate in important dialogues, let us look to these values that we hold so dear, and adequately respond. We can look to our *middot*, and decide if we need to be more patient or impatient, if we need to practice humility or if we need to take up more space in the political systems in our community, in order to advocate for change. Our *middot* are there to guide us, but we each need to decide how to balance these character traits within ourselves.

As Jews, we are commanded to be holy, to walk in God's ways. When God completed each day of creation, God looked back and evaluated it, and God saw that it was good. When you look back at this past year, what do you see? When future generations ask us how we responded to the cries of the children from the sinking boats, the shouts of the protesters, and the great debates of our time surrounding climate change, healthcare, terrorism and gun violence, we will remember how we responded. In this year 5777, let us each identify those *middot*, those values that are a part of our spiritual curriculum. Let us practice those values in the relationships we build with one another. Let us challenge ourselves to strengthen, deepen and broaden those relationships outside of this community, and then we will no longer feel paralyzed in the face of injustice, because we will know how to respond.

Bibliography:

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