

## Erev Rosh Hashanah – Being a Mensch

Shanah Tovah. May the coming year be filled with good health, happiness, the love and hugs of family and friends, and with growth and fulfillment. May we be blessed with a post-COVID return to normalcy as well as a society less polarized and more willing to respectfully talk with one another and compromise. Tonight, as we sit in our sanctuary or watch from the safety of our homes, as we contemplate the last year of our lives, as we process our successes and our failures, as we think about personal growth and change, I would like to focus on a critical message; a critical goal for the coming year. I believe that our mandate for 5782 should be “Be a Mensch!”

I would like to share with you some (a) strategies, (b) stories and (c) examples of those who have devoted time to thinking about what it means to be a mensch. Tales of those, who by their example, – what we call in Hebrew – “dugma’ot” - have taught us a lesson on what it truly means to be a mensch.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin opened one of his many books with the following: *“If you ask people what they most want from others, they will usually answer “good character.”* The knowledge that those with whom we interact are kind and honorable is the surest guarantee that we and our loved ones will be treated well. At the same time, if you ask most people what they want for themselves, they will answer, *“To be happy and successful.”* In short, Telushkin explains, *the reason we want good character from others and happiness and success for ourselves, is that in both cases, we want what is best for us.*” But as Rabbi Telushkin reminds us: *“What people don’t generally realize is that achieving the good things in life such as happiness, success and loving and meaningful relationships, depends on our developing within ourselves what we most want from others: good character.”* Often, our very success in life depends on our ability to develop good character traits.

In his book “The Ten Commandments of Character”, Rabbi Telushkin lists the ten prerequisites for being a person of good character:

1. Know your weaknesses.
2. When (a) ethics and (b) other values conflict, choose ethics.
3. Treat all people with kindness and understanding *“that they, like you, are created in the image of God.”*
4. Be fair.
5. Be courageous
6. Be honest

7. Be grateful
8. Practice self-control.
9. Exercise common sense.
10. Admit when you have done wrong, seek forgiveness and don't rationalize bad behavior.

What Rabbi Telushkin calls “good character” – is known in Hebrew as “*derech eretz*” – the “right way to live life” and in Yiddish, we simply say: “Be a mensch.”

Perhaps you've heard of “the marshmallow test”? This was a study of four-year-olds conducted at Stanford University. Children at the university's preschool were brought into a room one at a time. A marshmallow was placed on the table in front of them and they were told: “*You can have this marshmallow now if you want, but if you don't eat it until I come back into the room, you can have two marshmallows.*”

There were numerous fascinating long-term correlations observed. The study revealed that fourteen years later, as the participants were graduating high school, the children who had eaten the marshmallow right away were less able to resist temptation or to achieve their goals and were more likely “to fall apart” under stress. Good character requires the gift of being able to cultivate gratitude, the tenacity to be persistent and patient, the ability to exhibit self-control and discipline in our lives and the vision to develop courage and self-confidence.

When Rosa Parks was interviewed many years ago, she said: “*I had no idea when I refused to give up my seat on the Montgomery bus that my small action would help put an end to segregation in the South. I only knew that I was tired of being pushed around. I was a regular person as good as anyone else.*” Rosa Park's act not only transformed America for the better, but it also confirmed for her that she was a person of value, “*as good as anyone else.*” Having good character; the ability to stand up against evil and do the right thing turns out to be one of the greatest values we can have in life.

I realize that to write a best-seller today you might want to entitle the book: (a) “How To Lose Weight While Eating Ice Cream” or, (b) “How to Look Younger Each Day of Your Life” or (c) “How To Be A Genius Without Ever Opening a Book.” We are not going to produce a best seller by penning a book titled “Being a Mensch” BUT that is exactly what we, those of us here tonight, need to do – for it is at this time of year that we are being written in a book called “Sefer HaHayim”

– “the Book of Life.” In a sense, our tradition portrays that each Rosh HaShanah, we are each starting a new chapter in our Book of Life. So, as we contemplate what the next chapter will include, as we think about how we will fill the blank pages with examples of our good deeds, our values, our acts of kindness and caring, what better subject for us to think about and reflect on than on being a mensch?

A key ingredient to “being a mensch” can be found in a prayer on one of the first pages of our siddurim and mahzorim: “*L’olam yehei adam yareh shamayim b’sayter uvgalui*” – we should always revere God, in public as well as in private.” L’Olam Yehi Adam – really means “always be a mensch.” How? By showing real character, not only in public – but, in private. By making your word your bond and your life a sacred trust; By always being honest with yourself, and, thereby giving expression to the best within you!

So, a key ingredient is consistency – that you know a person is a mensch if he remains a mensch in all circumstances and can be relied upon to do the right thing no matter the situation. It is not acceptable to “be sweet with friends” and then treat the store clerk poorly when we believe we’ve been wronged. It is not acceptable to repeatedly respond with anger and then repeatedly ask for forgiveness. That is NOT menschlikeit.

Some of you may recall the name Rabbi Leo Baeck. There is a rabbinical school in London and a Reform Day School in Haifa that bears his name. Leo Baeck was a distinguished Reform rabbi in Berlin before the Holocaust. In 1938, when he was almost seventy years old, he was offered the pulpit of the largest synagogue in Cincinnati, Ohio. But he knew what was coming in Europe and refused to leave his congregation and community.

Ultimately, he was arrested and sent to Theresienstadt. There by day, he had to drag a garbage cart thorough the streets. But at night, he gave illegal lectures on Jewish philosophy, Jewish history and Jewish literature. He even wrote what became a significant book on scraps of paper when he could steal a few minutes. On one of the scraps of paper he wrote: “*a mensch remains a mensch even in Theresienstadt.*” The next time you feel the impulse to judge the work of another, to criticize, or to express anger because you’ve been wronged, remember: “*a mensch remains a mensch even in Theresienstadt.*”

Many years ago, there was also a very brilliant man named Robert Kirsch. Kirsch was the book critic for the Los Angeles Times. He summed up his values and life with these words: “Live, read, grow and be a mensch.”

Let me interpret his words for us:

- Live – try to live each day fully, enjoy it as a gift, and give thanks for your many blessings.
- Read – through biographies and history books, we gain the insights and share the lives of the greatest minds that ever lived. Even through fiction, we can explore the lives of people who may not have existed but from whom we can still learn the values and morals of life.
- And “Grow” – never stop growing as a person, never become satisfied with what you have achieved till now. Let your mind keep growing and stretching with new ideas and new insights. Let your heart keep growing with greater understanding and sensitivity towards others.
- A recent blogger offered the following regarding being a mensch:
  1. Help people who cannot help you;
  2. Help without the expectation of a return favor;
  3. Help many people.
  4. Do the right thing the right way.
  5. Remember: we owe something to society.

From Rabbi Telushkin we have learned about the importance of character and how to incorporate his “Ten Commandments of Character.” From the “Marshmallow Study” we learned about controlling our urges and temptations and following a course of patience and perseverance. From Rosa Parks we learn that to be a mensch means to be able to stand up for your beliefs. From Rabbi Leo Baeck, we learn how to be a mensch even in the midst of the greatest adversity. From critic Robert Kirsch we learn that to be a mensch means: “to live, to read, to grow.”

And so, as we begin a new year, as our world faces challenges that seem so overwhelming, as our citizens and country continue to suffer with seemingly few solutions in sight – let our agenda for 5782 be one that is achievable for each and every one of us: “Be a mensch!” May we be, as the philosopher Martin Buber described the essence of what it means to be a human being, may we be “humanly holy.” This year let’s “Be holy symbols.” This year let’s be “good Jews.” This year, let’s be mensches!”

*Shana Tovah*