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Kol Nidrei, 5777

### You Might be a Mussarnik

I'd like to ask you tonight collectively and individually for your forgiveness. This past year, I've let too many of you down and I've certainly let myself down. There were too many times that I was not available to you in the way I should have been. I did not call you back when you expected I would (or, in some cases, I didn't call back at all). It took me too long to return your email – or it slipped through the cracks altogether. I heard your opinion on some Temple-related matter and then I made a decision for the congregation that went against your advice or request. I have written too many Shabbat sermons during the 10-minute drive from my home to the Temple before services. I still haven't recovered from burying Evan Hyman in February and it has led me to act with impatience in matters that feel too petty and unimportant in light of that event. I'm emotional – sometimes I have a hard time walking the line between being the professional rabbi and being a human – one who deeply cares about his congregants and his coworkers and sometimes allow my commitment to your care to sway my decision-making. These have created honest challenges and emotional obstacles. They've presented me with clear ways that I'd like to be able to change.

These are my growing edges. I love this expression. I heard it first in rabbinical school from my teacher Dr. Nancy Weiner. It refers to the part of ourselves which is currently expanding. And, it always made me think of a lava flow. I've always been fascinated with the idea that the magma, emerging from the core of the earth is, as-yet-undefined rock. It will take the shape of whatever it finds as it crawls forward and, until it cools and grows firm, is malleable. But then, it ceases to be the earth's growing edge – it is no longer the frontier. Solidified and permanent, we assume there is not much hope for change.

The more I think about it, the more I like the lava as an analogy for humans. We pick a part of ourselves during liminal moments and we choose to expand beyond what has been our border to that point. There is, usually, a narrow window of time during which we can redefine ourselves and then, our attention shifts to something else and the opportunity for additional growth passes.

We tend to have a part of ourselves that we focus most strongly upon and put a lot of energy into and then, we turn our attention to some other aspect and the first focus solidifies and turns into a pattern. Developmental psychologists propose that humans seek to understand themselves in increasingly complex ways starting as soon as they complete their period of latency – around 12 years old or so. Ideally, that process never stops. Even Einstein said, “if you’re not learning, you’re dying.”<sup>1</sup>

There are so many different ways that we learn but you know that I’m not speaking about how we’re struggling to learn the operating system on our smartphone or new facts about the history of the Soviet Empire or how we’re learning the nature of the latest Kardashian escapade. What interests me is the expanding understanding we have of ourselves. And we all know that growth is not linear – we grow rapidly for a while and then we stagnate. As I apply this back to myself, I’m aware that I’m in a period of rapid growth.

I’m in a period of my career in which I’m learning lessons all the time. There were a few years right out of school that were rich with new understandings and then a bunch of years in Denver when I was simply doing my job and focused elsewhere on my growth as a father and friend. My attention has returned to my professional self and I have been overwhelmed by what I think Temple Sinai needs from me. I have been stretched to the point of exhaustion as I have been trying to do too many things and achieving none of them particularly well. And, like so many of us, I have been disproportionately hard on myself for the disappointments that I’ve created in the lives of a few congregants and, on the other hand, so many of you who have been positively touched by something I’ve said or something I’ve done, and I’ve failed to hear your gratitude or acknowledgment clearly enough.

So what is it about me that is so flawed? Well, the truth is, as I reflect on myself and lack confidence in my abilities as a rabbi. And, so I work too hard. I bring it up tonight because I think that I’m probably not alone. I end up putting in more than is necessary because I don’t always think that what I have to offer is good enough – so I overcompensate and try to make up

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<sup>1</sup> Einstein, Albert.

for my shortcomings with the amount of work I put in...in other words, if it's not great, at least there'll be a lot of it.

There's a wonderful parable to help us understand the man who doesn't believe he is up to the task which leads him to turn down an opportunity. A king who had a servant whom he loved completely. The king decided to promote him to serve as his royal administrator... What did the king do? He took the servant by the hand, and brought him into his treasury, and showed him his silver vessels, golden vessels, fine stones and gems, and all that he possessed within his treasury. After this, he brought him outside and showed him [his] trees, gardens, parks, enclosed areas, and all that was his in the fields. Afterward, the servant pulled back his hand from the king and said, 'I am incapable of being the administrator...' The king said to him, 'Since [you knew] that you could not be the administrator, why did you put me through all this trouble?!' And the king was angry with him, and decreed that he should never again enter his palace."<sup>1</sup> This parable, the Rabbis explain, can be compared to God, who wanted Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses took up God's time and conversed with him at the burning bush and then, turned down the opportunity to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. It was at this moment and for this sin, the midrash imagines, that God decreed the punishment for Moses: he would not enter the Land of Israel together with the rest of the people.

It's a strikingly vivid parable – one that inverts our expectations for the relationship between God and Moses, and challenges us to think about the proper balance of humility and ego. Moses was being called to serve, called to a sacred task, the midrash reminds us. [Rabbi Beth Kalisch](#) points out that for Moses to show such reluctance was not an act of humility, but of hubris. By claiming himself so small, he paradoxically aggrandized himself in comparison to the people that he was being called to serve.<sup>2</sup> Many of us have fallen into the trap of feeling inadequate and, while avoiding our opportunities, we not only miss out on fulfilling our purpose, but call unnecessary negative attention to ourselves in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Mechilta De-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai 1:4

<sup>2</sup> See more at: [http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/shmot/how-humble-too-humble?utm\\_source=WU&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=20160101&utm\\_campaign=WeeklyParsha#sthash.7y1KLlyU.dpuf](http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/shmot/how-humble-too-humble?utm_source=WU&utm_medium=email&utm_content=20160101&utm_campaign=WeeklyParsha#sthash.7y1KLlyU.dpuf)

And why not? There is a lot telling us that we're not measuring up to the standard around us. Women have to do it all: first, if they're not out earning a paycheck, then they have to justify their value to their families, as though it isn't self-evident. They assume that they have to manage all the household tasks, schlep the kids, make meals, keep themselves looking great and then, if there is anything left in their reserves, we can discuss going back to work for your own career. Men are differently challenged: we are encouraged to work beyond our healthy capacity to get ahead; to make ourselves stand out; to earn more money; to satisfy our bosses; to earn our coworker's respect – all of these external metrics for our success. Our children have to play too many sports and take too many Advanced Placement classes in order to distinguish themselves from their peers and to get noticed by the college boards. Many of you have heard me reference this – I believe in my heart that we're damaging our children with the pressure we allow them to live with. We're all exerting an immense amount of energy – we're just not putting it in the right places most of the time.

Where should we be putting our precious energy? Alan Morinis is a scholar and author who has revived a tool, available to us, that I'd like to share a bit about. Mussar is a path of contemplative practices and exercises that have evolved over the past thousand years to help an individual soul to pinpoint and then to break through the barriers that surround and obstruct the flow of inner light in our lives. Mussar is a treasury of techniques and understandings that offers immensely valuable guidance for the journey of our lives.<sup>1</sup> It is a system of study, discussion and practice that helps the individual to get right down to the core characteristics that define him or her and then to practice refining them. It is not navel-gazing; We will compare the version of ourselves that walk through the world against the version we believe to be inside when we look in the mirror. It is serious and productive work for the person who is willing to admit that they are not yet their own final draft.

Brought together in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Rabbi Israel Salanter, it builds upon material that dates back 1000 years. Salanter encourages participants to “Speak quietly and deliberately without joking or irony, estimate the good traits of man and his faults, how he should be

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mussarinstitute.org/wisdom-way.htm>

castigated to turn away from the latter and strengthen the former. Do not decide matters at a single glance, divide the good work among you – not taking up much time, not putting on too heavy a burden. Little by little, much will be gathered ... In the quiet of reflection, in reasonable deliberation, each will strengthen his fellow and cure the foolishness of his heart and eliminate his lazy habits."<sup>1</sup> Just as Mussar insists on an unflinchingly honest accounting of our faults, it also demands that we take some credit for our strengths – I can say that it has allowed *me* to do both and I can feel strength emerging from the process. Stick with me here as I'm going to try to show you a method of viewing these traits through the lens of a Mussar practice.

I've tried to be honest with you about some of what I've done badly this year. I'll share a few more truths about myself that I acknowledge: I know that I need a competent and reliable administrative assistant to help me accomplish my job – and I've got two terrific partners in Jayne Vasco and Shelly Welfeld. I know that I'm terrified of standing in front of a group of people I don't know – which is why services on these High Holidays have gotten increasingly more enjoyable for me at Temple Sinai the better I've come to know you. I don't trust my artistic abilities. I'm a lousy team-sport athlete because I'm paralyzed by the fear that I'll let the other teammates down.

I need Jayne because I get deeply immersed in whatever or whomever is right in front of me at the moment. I'm often scrambling to get to my next meeting because I got lost in a conversation with depth and importance. It means that I'll almost never be looking over your shoulder at one's to see who else is there that I need to say "hello" to. I believe that the mishnah was correct when it taught me that we share 1/60<sup>th</sup> of ourselves with the person who is really paying attention<sup>2</sup> and I seek to be that person as often as I can manage it. The fear of the group of strangers is because I think of myself as a pretty good teacher and a successful educator knows his students, what they believe, what they're going through, how to deliver ideas and does so with each student in mind. One cannot do that with strangers. I'm afraid of art because there is a perfectionist buried deep within me – and that's not a bad thing, I just haven't gotten to be friends with him yet. And the team sports thing means that I want people

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<sup>1</sup> R. Israel Salanter, 1849, Mussar Shtiebl

<sup>2</sup> Based on the teaching of b. Nedarim 39b.

to be able to count on me. I don't want to be the one that everyone turns to for that buzzer beater and then feel frustrated that I couldn't be what they want me to be – I'm a pleaser and that's not a bad thing either – most of the time.

As we look to the task of 21<sup>st</sup> century religion and what it has to offer its members, I put **this** work on the short list of what I think will provide value to the serious participant. I'm looking forward to developing a group of folks who will gather regularly to put in the effort. Now, let me help you know if this might include you. Betsy Stone and Debbie Morgenthaler have been running a Shabbat Family program these last few years with a group of self-selected kids alongside their parent. The learning is focused on depth concepts, identity clarification and learning through the emotions of Judaism. If you've been a participant of the program and have loved it, you might be a Mussarnik. If you're hearing this description and wishing that it had been an option for you when your kids were of religious school age, then you might be a Mussarnik. If you have young ones and are hoping that we're still running a program like this in a few years for you and your children, then you might be a Mussarnik. If you hated the parochialism of your own religious schooling some years back and wished that Judaism was more relevant, you might be a Mussarnik. If you've been feeling like you lack the enthusiasm for the parts of your life that you know you're blessed to have, you might be a Mussarnik. Salanter said, "A good Jew is not one who looks out for another person's soul and his own stomach, but rather the other person's stomach and his own soul."<sup>1</sup> If you've been volunteering lately but not spending energy on feeding your own soul, you might be a Mussarnik.

I should be clear, this is not confessional in nature and it's not group therapy. This is a deeply Jewish form of reaching into our depths to understand what we find there and then learning how to be the best version of that self...considering what we've got to work with. It will take some time and some commitment but doesn't anything that's worth achieving? The founder of one of the main schools of Mussar, Rabbi Yosef Yozel Hurwitz of Novarodock said, ""The problem with people is that they want to change overnight and have a good night's sleep

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1810–1883), founder of the Mussar movement

that night too.”<sup>1</sup> We won’t see changes overnight but I assure you, the task will yield great riches to the person who decides to join the experience with an open heart.

We will begin our first session, no commitment necessary yet, on **Sunday morning, the 23rd at 10am**. It’ll be in your email inboxes when you get home from services tonight. It’ll be on the website if you forget and you can certainly call me to talk it over if you need more information. Let this be the year that we allocate some of that Divine gift of Self-Awareness back towards our own selves and may the pursuit bring another level of meaning into our lives. **כן יהי רצון!** – Let this be God’s will!

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Yosef Yozel Hurwitz (1849–1919), founder of the Novarodock branch of Mussar