

## Looking for the Good in the Great

Yom Kippur 5777

Rabbi Neil Cooper

There is a saying in the Talmud: *Kol hatchalot kashot* \ beginnings are always difficult. That especially is true when it comes to writing a sermon and, even more so, a High Holiday sermon. I thought I might start with a joke or, perhaps, a Chasidic story.

I don't know any good Yom Kippur jokes. But it seemed to me that starting with a Chasidic story could provide an appropriate tone for a Yom Kippur sermon. You see, Chasidic stories generally convey profound lessons regarding proper conduct and attitudes, exactly the themes we emphasize on Yom Kippur. And so, I searched a number of collections of Chasidic stories, unfortunately, without success. I even checked **chasidicstories.com**. Still, I could not find a story which was just right. But, as I read through the stories, I found something quite curious which was helpful to me, although not in the way that I had anticipated.

As I read through the stories, I realized that nearly everyone was attributed to a great rabbi:

A great rabbi once said...

A great rabbi was called upon to decide...

A great rabbi was consulted....

Chasidic stories, it seems, are told only by "great rabbis". Indeed, I could not find a single story which quoted a Chasidic rabbi who was...mediocre or who was less-than-brilliant. Every rabbi was great.

How is it possible that all of the rabbis in these stories are not just good, but great? Moreover, I know lots of rabbis. I can tell you that very few would be considered great. Have all the great rabbis historically gravitated to Chasidism, leaving the rest to assume positions in the Conservative and Reform Movements!?

As I pondered my discovery I came to a conclusion which might explain this anomaly. The fact is that Chasidic rabbis are **not** all great. Some of those stories were, in fact, told by "B-/ C+" rabbis. Why then were they called great? They were regarded as great because those who collected the stories were in search of greatness. The rabbis in the stories may have had lots of faults and flaws but, no matter how mediocre a rabbi is, there are always opportunities for greatness.

At the same time, however, I am certain that the congregants of these "great" rabbis who were quoted in the Chasidic stories had no problem finding reasons that these "great" Rabbis were not so great. They may have said:

Oy, the rabbi's sermons... I was more inspired by yesterday's tuna fish,

Have you noticed how awkward the rabbi is when he tries to strike up conversations at Kiddush after services?

Did you see how he smiled at everyone else and how he never smiles at me?

But, he is still a great rabbi. He is great, you see, because:

In a moment of communal crisis, when we needed his leadership and guidance, he was there.

When my child needed help, I'll never forget what he did for our son and our family.

When our marriage was on the rocks, he saved us. We will never forget his kindness, his compassion and his advice.

We love stories about great rabbis and when we encounter, directly or indirectly, one who is great, we appreciate their skills, their gifts and their accomplishments. We are drawn to them. We want to be in their presence. They become our heroes.

The hit rap-musical "Hamilton" has become a national phenomenon. Today, one can pay upwards of \$2000 for a single ticket. The show is taking in about \$1.5M each week in ticket sales and enjoying a profit of about \$500K each week. Several months ago, The New York Times magazine suggested that "Hamilton" was on a trajectory which would result in \$1 B in revenue, just from the New York show. To say that this show is a success is an understatement.

Even before the musical was written, Alexander Hamilton was one of my all-time heroes. Although I have not seen the play, I have listened to all of the music/raps (**both** CDs). The play portrays Hamilton beautifully, using as a guide the wonderful and exhaustive biography of Hamilton written by Ron Chernoff (a must read for any student of American history).

Hamilton, the man, was brilliant. He was a star during the formative period of America, from the Revolutionary War through the crucial first steps this nation needed to take in order to establish a new form of Government. Hamilton was at the epicenter of the political and the social scenes.

Hamilton's life was cut short by his famous duel with Aaron Burr (in that duel, to use an Olympic-style description, Hamilton received the Silver Medal). He lived, however, with a sense of urgency. Somehow, as if he foresaw his own early demise, he managed to find the time and the energy to establish the National Banking system and the US Navy by day and write, at night, a majority of the Federalist Papers, which went from his desk directly to the printer the next morning, remarkably, without checking or editing.

What is it about this play which has so captured the imagination of this country? I take nothing

away from Lin-Manuel Miranda, the genius playwright and rap composer. But there is something going on here which reaches far beyond the play itself. This play takes us back to a time when great men recorded great ideas, created great paradigms of government, set great goals. This is the story of a great moment in history which demanded great decisions and accomplishments. And this is the story of the great men who made all of this happen.

“Hamilton” also reminds us that one can be both great and flawed simultaneously. The same could be said of the others who also appear on stage in this play: Washington, Jefferson, Adams and Madison. Each imperfect. Yet this is the most elite group in American History. These are the great ones to whom we, as Americans, can look up. These great, yet flawed, Founding Fathers continue to pack the theatre every night before audiences which are unrestrained and unequivocal in their approval!

We love greatness and our thirst for it continues unabated:

In addition to the \$2000 some have paid to see “Hamilton”, they will still buy tickets for (another!)\$2000 each to attend Adelle’s upcoming concert in Philadelphia.

This summer, our entire country was glued to the television watching the Olympics in order to witness the greatest and most gifted athletes in the world compete. Here our search for greatness, it seemed, went from interest to obsession. For two weeks we filled every free second by turning on the Olympics. You have all heard of hyperactivity or ADHD. I came up a name for the US obsession with the Olympics this summer. I call it a national case of HDTV.

It is natural to seek out greatness, to look for it, to watch it on TV and witness it before our eyes. And, in a similar way, it is natural to hope and even to expect that the President of the US, whoever it is or whoever it will be, will be great. Greatness, after all is, ...well, great. And so, as we anticipate a presidential election, we ask: where can we find greatness today? What can we learn about greatness from the “greats” of the past? If we want to be **great again**, where can that greatness be found today?

In his most recent book, Aaron David Miller, the distinguished scholar and advisor to both Democratic and Republican Secretaries of State, looks at those who have served as President of the United States and attempts to identify the past Presidents who, at least according to his definition, deserve to be called great. He begins his book, therefore, by establishing for himself some criteria for measuring presidential greatness. Presidential greatness, he writes, requires three indispensable features: First, there must be a significant and identifiable, existential **crisis** which a president needs to confront and overcome. A great president must possess the **capacity** to manage the crisis. And he/she must possess the **character** to inspire confidence, the personality to serve as a healing and unifying force in order to engage, mobilize or comfort the people.

Some Presidents have succeeded with one or two of the criteria, but, according to Miller, only three Presidents can claim to have lead this country with all three aspects (crisis, capacity and character) of great leadership and, thus, be considered, at least by Miller, a great President. They are: George

Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt/FDR. You may or may not agree with his criteria or his choices but, from his perspective and from his definition of greatness in the Presidency, only these three Presidents have reached greatness.

And so, where is greatness today? Miller gives us his answer to this question in the title of the book which I have already referenced, The End of Greatness. Miller, the scholar and expert on the US Presidency, believes, for a variety of reasons, that greatness in the Presidency is no longer possible, not because of today's leaders are not potentially great but because the world in its complexity and technological capabilities make it impossible for a single leader to wield the kind of power, control and influence great leaders have amassed in the past. For Miller, since greatness is no longer possible we must simply make due with candidates that are less than great, comforted by the fact that power and influence today are diminished. Certainly, when we stop looking for greatness in our candidates, choices for some may become easier.

For me, however, greatness has never been a decisive quality, not only because it is rare but because greatness is not enough. From a Jewish perspective, we need to look beyond greatness, both in the voting booth and in living our lives. In fact, Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, comes to remind us that there is something even more important than greatness. Yom Kippur, our most important Holiday, is not about being great. Yom Kippur is about becoming a better human being. Yom Kippur is about striving to be good. **You see, to be a great human being, you, first, need to be good.**

To be good, in a deeply moral and personal way, does not require great ability as an orator, great capacity to initiate great ideas or a great personality. Before looking out upon one's vast financial empire, before one prepares to lead a country, before one determines how best to use the great power one may have amassed or inherited, one must first look into the mirror. Good begins with personal scrutiny, with an examination of deeds, grand and trivial. With a sense of humility.

A great leader must look at him/herself each day, not to figure out how to be great but in order to figure out how to be good. And if you think that great leaders or great candidates don't need such things, allow me to share with you this story about Moses, the greatest of our biblical leaders, a story which makes the point quite elegantly.

How did Moses see himself? An aggadah, a rabbinic tale, suggests the following: (Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, Vol. II, pp. 275-276):

Moses' reputation preceded him. Having led his people out of Egypt, defeating the most powerful army of that time, the Egyptian army, at the Red Sea, Moses became known among the surrounding kingdoms as an invincible foe and powerful leader. As Moses lead the Children of Israel through the desert, kings of other nations must have been both curious about this great leader and a bit scared that the one who defeated Egypt would turn on them as well. One king wanted to find out more about Moses.

“Who is this Moses? What sort of person is he?” asked one king.

As the Israelites traveled through the desert nearing a local Kingdom, the king decided to answer his own questions by investigating Moses' character:

To find out about Moses' personality, the King sent to meet Moses his royal physiognomist. A physiognomist is an artist with the special talent of drawing portraits which would reveal a person's true, inner self and personality. Seeing the portrait, therefore, would reveal to the King Moses' character. And with his instructions from the King, the portrait artist left.

After meeting Moses, the court appointed physiognomist created his portrait and returned to the King. The King assembled his council of wise men to view the portrait which had been created and to judge Moses' personality. The wise men sat together carefully studying the portrait before them and, as they each spoke, they were in full agreement about the character and qualities which the picture conveyed: This Moses is covetous, haughty, sensual, deceptive and, in short, distinguished by all possible ugly traits.

The King, in disbelief, sent the physiognomist a second time to paint Moses. And, again, after viewing the second portrait, the consensus was, as before, that this was a man in whom grew the most terrible traits a person could possess.

Unwilling to believe that the analysis of the portrait was correct, the King went to meet Moses in person and to ask Moses his opinion of the portrait. Moses welcomed the King when he arrived and, speaking to the King, confirmed that, yes, indeed, the portrait had been drawn correctly:

I possess all of those reprehensible qualities, he confessed.

But Moses went on to explain himself:

I possess all of those character traits, I see these every time I look in the mirror but I have worked to control them rather than to allow them to control me. It was through my strong will and the severe discipline which I have imposed upon myself that I have been able to overcome these traits.

We see Moses as a powerful and authoritative person. It was by virtue of his forceful and righteous personality that he convinced Pharaoh to release the Children of Israel from their bondage. No biblical character is more revered than *Moshe Rabbeinu*. No biblical hero confronted more crises, required such great capacity or is credited with more accomplishments. Publicly, Moses was a pillar of strength and self-assuredness. Moses was, unquestionably a great leader. In fact, the Torah ends with that explicit pronouncement at the time of Moses' death:

*Lo kam navi 'od b'yisrael ki-moshe / Never again did there arise a Prophet like Moses... who displayed before all Israel (such) great might and awesome power (Deut. 34:10 – 12).*

But what we learn from this most revealing *aggadah* is that when Moses woke up in the morning and looked in the mirror, he saw a reprehensible person looking back at him. For all of the greatness which we ascribe to Moses, he saw none of it. When Moses looked at himself, his gaze penetrated any outward qualities of greatness. He could see what others could not and did not want to see.

Moses judged himself not as a great leader but as a flawed human being. He observed and assessed himself with brutal and unflinching honesty. The message of this *aggadah* is that great leaders are great, not because they strive for greatness but because they see their faults and work to overcome them, they see that which is weak within them and try to strengthen it, they recognize their inclinations and choose to confront those inclinations, overcome them and strive for goodness. It is this challenge which great leaders, as well as those aspiring to be elected as great leaders of this great nation must confront. It is this very challenge which Yom Kippur demands that we confront as well.

On Yom Kippur, you see, we must regard ourselves deeply and honestly, unadorned and without pretense. This is the day when we confront the pettiness of needing always to be right. Today we acknowledge the blemishes and the warts of selfishness, pride and entitlement. We are charged on this day to look, beneath the superficial, at those personality traits which stand between greatness and goodness. Yom Kippur demands a realignment of priorities from the dream of being great to the desire to be good. And this, by the way is a crucial message for our leaders, for us and, especially for our children to internalize.

A word about our children: Our community of Lower Merion and the surrounding areas, cherishes good schools and high academic achievements. We want our children to strive for excellence and we push them to excel. Ours are like the children who live in Garrison Kiellor's fictitious town, Lake Woebegone, where all the children are of above-average intelligence. We want them **all** to score highest on SAT, to accumulate the highest grades for their transcripts and be extolled for their excellence by their teachers. In short, we want our children to be **great**. And why not, if they have potential and the natural gifts to excel academically?

But, as they are striving for excellence and greatness in their studies, as we push them toward excellence and greatness, do we emphasize the importance of being good? Do our children know, do **we** these goals know which is more important: greatness or goodness? Yom Kippur is a reminder that being good, not great, must remain at the core our humanity.

On Yom Kippur, our mission is clear and straight-forward. On Yom Kippur we commit to asking the tough questions and to becoming a better version of ourselves. On Yom Kippur we commit to critique ourselves differently so that when we look in the mirror, we see beyond the superficial. We can see weaknesses and blemishes within, if we choose to look. We can review the words we have used to

chastise, describe or to criticize. We reconsider language we have used which may have been heard as demeaning, objectifying or degrading if we choose to recall.

We remember those times when we remained silent when you should have spoken. We scrutinize the loving relationships we cherish. We focus, if only for a moment, on what we may have done differently. And, when we look inward, we notice as well the changes since last you looked. God does not expect perfection or greatness. God simply wants us to be our best self.

And here I return to contemporary events, specifically the upcoming Presidential election. On rabbinic websites and from a variety of organizations, there have been video conferences, live-streamed sessions with top scholars and writers, not to mention partisan organizations, all trying to advise rabbis on how to approach from the pulpit the upcoming presidential election or, as some have formulated it: How shall we address the pink elephant which occupies every sanctuary during these High Holidays (without jeopardizing our 501c3 status)?

We want our candidates to be great. We would like the winner of the upcoming election to be exude greatness and enable us to believe that they will be a great President. And yet, this year more than others, there is a palpable lack of excitement for either candidate. Some have confided that neither candidate inspires within them the kind of enthusiasm they like to feel when they vote for President. We want our candidates to be great and we are not feeling their greatness.

For that reason, I have tried this morning, to turn our attention away from the notion of finding greatness in Presidential candidates. As Aaron David Miller suggests, greatness may no longer be attainable by any candidate, now or in the foreseeable future. Whether or not he is correct, I believe that greatness is a subjective and an elusive quality, something which is unfair and unnecessary to require of the candidate who wins your vote.

Certainly, in deciding for whom to vote, people will correctly focus on different aspects of each candidate. We will consider:

1. Policy positions on the economy, immigration and gun control.
2. We will want to know who he/she will appoint to the Supreme Court.
3. We will consider who is best qualified for the job and, of course,
4. Whose hairstyle or pant-suit do I like best?

But having weighed all of these factors we like to consider as we are ready to make our respective choices, add one more quality into the mix: Look beyond the policies and programs. Don't ask what kind of candidate is that person? Instead ask, what kind of person is that candidate? I would like to know, not that our candidate is great, but that our candidate is good. And I would suggest that we focus not on **making America great**, but on **making America good**.

I would like to know that in moments of quiet contemplation, my candidate asks: What sort of person am I? I would like to know that he/she wakes up in the morning, looks in the mirror and sees themselves honestly, beyond the superficial. I would like to know that my candidate is as good as he/she can be. And my candidate wonders how he/she could be a better person.

Here I add a final caveat: Being good does not mean being weak, equivocal or indecisive. I mention this because there are those who might say, "Do you want someone who is good or do you want someone who is tough: tough on Israel, on security and tough on criminals?" This is a false dichotomy.

Whoever is chosen to lead this country must exercise her/his presidential authority and strength to protect the citizens of this country.

Whoever leads this country must be motivated and unwavering in their support of Israel. They must be committed to helping eradicating the imminent threats which surround Israel and with which Israelis live each and every day.

Whoever leads this country must see through the lies of moral equivalence when assessing hostilities against Israel and hatred of Israel harbored by her enemies. Israel's enemies would destroy her and those who live there in a heartbeat if given both means and opportunity. To think otherwise, to believe that if you adopt a stance which excuses or overlooks terror, or if you embraces those who hate Jews and think that acceptance and embrace will protect you from evil, think again. To believe that by accepting and excusing violence, your acquiescence will protect you somehow from the designs of evil people in this world would be a naïve and dangerous mistake. To believe that is to believe that the charging bull will not gore you because you are a vegetarian!

Not only do I believe that one can be good and be a good, strong and unwavering supporter of Israel, I don't see how one can claim to be good and **not** be a strong supporter Israel! The next President of the USA must find **within herself/himself** the courage and conviction to stand with Israel. Only those who stand with us are worthy and capable of leading us forward, towards that which is good and towards a better world.

As we look forward to a new year, let us strive to be true to ourselves, to look honestly at our actions, to consider more carefully the words we speak and to live with integrity, without pretending to be that which we are not.

May we place the highest values on honesty, integrity and compassion, both personally and nationally.

This year may we stand with resolute conviction **against** evil and **with** those who stand for and fight for that which is good.

May we be blessed with a spirit of humility so that, when **we** look into the mirror, we see the same goodness in ourselves as we hope to see in others.

And, may those who lead us in the years to come, whether or not they reach a level of greatness in their leadership, bring strength and integrity to our nation and, in the process, "Make American Good".

*Kitiva V'Chatima Tova:* May we all be inscribed and sealed for a new year of health, joy and goodness.

*V'Chen YeHi Ratzon.*