

Moral Exemplars
Rabbi Michael S. Friedman
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5777/2016

On July 2 of this year Elie Wiesel passed away. That night I felt compelled to write to the congregation. "It is difficult to imagine a more significant communal loss," I wrote. I noted that Wiesel is credited with introducing the Holocaust to a world that had chosen to ignore its reality.

But Elie Wiesel was much more than a witness to man's inhumanity to man. His greatest impact was that, in time, Wiesel transcended his suffering to become a powerful force for decency and justice. He devoted the rest of his life to cultivating the human capacity for compassion, inspiring the best impulses of all people through his writing, speaking and moral leadership. Elie Wiesel epitomized what it means to be human and what it means to be a Jew. For generations he was a beacon, guiding the path of righteousness. I think we all felt secure in his long shadow.

Muhammad Ali passed this year too. As we know, his impact extended far beyond the boxing ring. Ali challenged all of us to see the complexities of the Vietnam War. His adherence to his personal moral convictions made him a symbol of individual integrity, and a voice for peace in a time of growing conflict.

The list goes on: we lost Harper Lee this year as well. In writing *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she shaped the moral sense of generations of young Americans by telling a "sobering tale of race relations in the Deep South during the Jim Crow era."¹

It seems to me that this year and in recent years we have lost an extraordinary number of figures of great stature. It was only a couple of years ago that Nelson Mandela died. And just this week, Shimon Peres. So I wonder, on the eve of this New Year, how are we to forge a world of hope and justice and peace without their substantial influence and their moral example?

Perhaps I am feeling particularly adrift this Rosh Hashanah because of three additional losses that affected me personally this year.

Rabbi Eugene Borowitz died in January. Dr. Borowitz was *the* towering figure among Reform rabbis, the great intellectual and moral voice of Reform Judaism. He taught generations of rabbis, holding us to rigorous philosophical and ethical standards. As students we cowered in fear of his piercing gaze. Yet in time we realized he didn't ask anything of us that he didn't require of himself. And then we loved him for that. We

¹ *The New York Times*, February 19, 2016.

were grateful for his high expectations, which challenged us to reach farther and deeper than we otherwise would have.

Father Tom Hartmann died in February. In addition to serving as a beloved priest on Long Island, Father Tom created an interfaith program for Catholic and Jewish teens in which I participated when I was in high school, and subsequently led early on in my rabbinate. As the bagpipes sounded their farewell at his funeral I cried for the loss of sweetness and gentleness in our world. Father Tom taught me that kindness was of infinite value, and that a good deed – however small it may seem – does not go unnoticed. He also taught me about the power of faith. When you and I sit together and discuss matters of life and God, I want you to know that Father Tom is sitting with us as well.

My great aunt, Estelle Falik, passed in April at the age of 96. At her graveside funeral I spoke of Estelle as a woman of class, grace and sophistication. She was extraordinarily generous, and possessed a deep wisdom that she knew how to share in just the right way. Her passing marked the end of a generation in our family; sadly, no one of my grandparents' generation remains.

Some people may not need moral exemplars in their life. But I do. Left to my own devices, without the influence of teachers and mentors, who knows what choices I would make? I need others to set an example. I need others to show me how good human beings can be. I need others to set a standard for me to live up to. I never met Elie Wiesel, or Muhammad Ali, or Harper Lee. Neither Dr. Borowitz, nor Father Tom nor Aunt Estelle were a daily presence for me. But I needed them in my life.

It seems impossible that we will begin a new Jewish year without these moral exemplars. I wonder, how can I find my way without these individuals to guide our path? Who will hold us to high expectations? Who will inspire us to be our best selves?

We think about how we learn what is right and good. Much credit goes to our parents in our early years. They teach us how to behave and how to treat others: share with friends, apologize when you've hurt someone, see your commitments through. Then there are principles we learn along the way. Perhaps those come from Torah: care for the widow, orphan and stranger; love your neighbor as yourself.

And then there are influential figures who teach us by the power of personal example. They teach us not from aphorisms or parables or laws, but from their unshakable integrity, innate goodness, and sheer force of character.

In any endeavor, we need models to show us the way, to envision and then live out what is possible. With all the losses we have suffered, who will now be our moral exemplars?

If we look to our sacred texts, Christians surely have the advantage. They can look to the life of Jesus. The stories about his life are written exactly that way, as a moral exemplar for all to follow – a man who not only does what is right, but spends his entire life in selfless, generous actions to alleviate poverty and foster peace.

Our Torah, in contrast, is filled with morally dubious men and women. Abraham kicks his first son, Ishmael, out of the house, and the boy nearly dies of thirst in the desert. Then he almost goes through with the sacrifice of his second, beloved son, Isaac. Jacob swindles his brother out of the family birthright and tricks his father into giving him the coveted blessing intended for the firstborn. Moses is a reluctant leader, constantly complaining about those he must lead, angry at God for the role that has been thrust upon him. Unable to control his own emotions, beset by thirsty and rambunctious followers, he verbally insults his people then strikes the rock, and is thus barred from entering the promised land as punishment. So while the laws and principles of the Torah always provide our ethical blueprint, our biblical ancestors were terribly flawed. They are hardly the models we aim to live up to.

In more recent times, political leaders used to be considered moral exemplars. So did athletes. Newscasters, too, used to be endowed with a level of public trust and integrity. All that has of course evaporated.

As we sit here together to consider and reflect on this Rosh Hashanah I would ask you: How do you trace your own moral genealogy?² Who shaped the standards by which you carry yourself? To whom do you look as a model of how to live a good life?

I would bet that each of us has several such figures in our life. Few of them are famous.

- For many, it is a parent who provides the model of character and fortitude that we aim to follow.
- For some of us it is the friend whose approval you seek – not because she is popular, but because she spends her time and her talent in ways that you admire.
- There is the colleague who went out of his way to help a co-worker – something we wish we had done, in fact we intended to do, but somehow we never got around to it.
- It could be the mentor who hired you and showed you the ropes of your career with patience and generosity, or the supervisor who mercifully gave you a break when you really needed one.
- There's the relative who may not make headlines, but whose integrity and hard work and commitment to family we have always admired.

² Term used by Kathryn Schulz in "The Perilous Lure of the Underground Railroad," *The New Yorker*, August 22, 2016.

- Or it's the friend you turn to when you want to have a truly honest and authentic conversation.
- Or even the acquaintance who, when faced with a terminal diagnosis, turned tragedy into an opportunity to inspire others.
- For some it is the spouse who we try to make proud every day. A friend of mine said of her husband, "His balance between emotional wisdom, sensitivity and true goodness keeps us consistently on the right side of decisions."

In this New Year, let us surround ourselves with human beings whose moral consistency we admire and upon whose moral compass we can rely. This is how we remind ourselves to do good, and how we stick to the path of righteousness. In this New Year, let us commit to spending more time with those who inspire us, who bring out the best in us, who remind us that we can do more than we imagine.

It is not up to us to fashion new moral heroes. I doubt such a thing is possible anyway. One cannot invent an Elie Wiesel, a Nelson Mandela. We cannot create exemplars by building someone up, for to do so would inevitably fail.

Perhaps you too have suffered a similar significant loss of a teacher or mentor or friend this year. Especially as a generation of influential figures passes on, we realize that we are the ones who must fill the void. We must be the moral exemplars ourselves.

Is this too much responsibility? I don't think so. There's an old rabbinic story that I love. Rabbi Zusya, a great sage of his generation, lay dying. His students were gathered around him. Zusya was scared and trembling. His students asked what he was afraid of. He said, "I have realized that in the world to come, God will not ask me, 'Why were you not as great as Moses?' God will ask me, 'Why were you not as great as Zusya?'"³

Yes, a world without these historic moral exemplars can still be a world of goodness and hope. We need only be Zusya – our own best selves – to make it so. I have listened to many b'nai mitzvah students speak from this bima about the example set by Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks. I pray that they may, one day, God willing, live up to the achievements of Dr. King or Ms. Parks. And I have heard just as many b'nai mitzvah students speak about the example provided by their own grandparents. And let me tell you, that is just as powerful, if not more so.

Those of you who have visited my office have seen that I have a number of black and white photos on the walls. They are there to remind me that I am heir to a particular moral legacy. The series of photos of rabbis marching with Dr. King and Rev. Abernathy and other civil rights leaders reminds me that I am inheritor of the mantle of rabbis who worked to create a world of justice and peace. But more importantly there's the photo of my grandfather, George Goldberg. He died 14 years ago but his image remains just

³ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*.

next to my desk. More than Elie Wiesel or Dr. Borowitz or Father Tom, it is my grandfather's example that I strive to live up to. He is with me every day, watching over my shoulder. And every day I want to make him proud.

We need not wonder where our moral exemplars have gone. They are sitting right here among us. Each of us need not be Moses, we only need to be Zusya. Each of us lives the goodness that is within us: instilled by our parents, nurtured by our teachers, cultivated by our mentors, enriched by our spouses, inspired by our friends. That is our own moral legacy, and that legacy will reverberate down through the generations.

In this New Year, may it be so. *Ken yehi ratzon.*