

YK 5778 Sermon: *Beginner's Heart*
Danny Moss

נֵר יְהוָה נִשְׁמַת אָדָם
The spirit within us is the candle of God.¹

The sun began to set. Chanukah had arrived, but you wouldn't know it -- there was hardly a light to be seen. A boy and his father shivered, huddled together against the frigid December air. It was the dead of winter in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The father reached into his pocket, removing a thin margarine ration and a match. "What are you doing, papa -- That's the only food we've gotten all day!" His father molded the margarine as best he could into a shape approximating a candle. He then turned to his son, and said:

"My child, we know you can live three days without water.
You can live for three weeks without food,
But you can't live even three minutes without hope."²

Says King Solomon: The spirit within us is the candle of God.

I confess that I have always found this Proverb difficult to understand. But here's one thing it might mean: we all carry a candle within us, and it burns with the promise that goodness and love will prevail in the world. We fuel that candle with our hopes, and kindle it with our passion for justice and our compassion for others. It is our job to keep our candles burning; to bring their light into the world.

How difficult that can be. Our world has never been a perfect place, but this year it feels particularly dark and cold. And confusing. "thousand-year storms" are not supposed to come several-at-a-time. It used to be that hate would hide behind white hoods; now the hoods have come off. We expect our elected leaders to show moral courage, but instead we've seen equivocation, falsehood, and cruelty. In short, the moral order seems to have caved in upon itself.

How disorienting, how surreal, this alternate reality of alternate morality and "alternate facts."³ Yet how easy is it to tune out, to disengage; to dismiss as absurd?

Keeping our moral compass pointing north can be extremely difficult at a time like this. All of us have felt angry, or sad, or scared this year. I don't care your politics: this has been the year of

¹ Proverbs 20.27

² A story told by (and about) Rabbi Hugo Gryn

³ On the spike in sales of Orwell's "1984" and the rise of "alternate facts" and <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/24/us/george-orwell-1984-best-seller-trump-trnd/index.html>

“equal opportunity outrage.” How can we let that passion rage and burn for the good, without burning out? How can we stay awake and attentive when the news cycle inundates us with one indignity after another? How can we resist throwing our hands up in the air and checking out entirely?

Dr. Eboo Patel, founder of the Interfaith Youth Corps, observes that moral outrage often ends up “shedding more heat than light on the problem.” He advises, “When I go to sleep turning [things] over in my mind, and wake up wondering which solution will work best, there is hope that I am being purposeful. Time is the true test. Self-righteousness is like a match – it lights with an impressive flare but burns out quickly.”⁴

Our moral instincts do us credit; we should both heed and feed them. But we make better decisions in the long run when we supplement indignation with *deliberation*; anger with strategic thinking. So this morning I’d like to speak to you about how we can nourish and replenish our moral core, that we may act for justice and brave the storm together.

It was my first summer at sleepaway camp. I was seven or eight. At bedtime, my counselor told us that we could stay up and talk until the first staff patrol came to check on us. Of course, many of the boys stayed up, giggling and telling jokes long past that time. All the while I laid in my bed squirming, flustered by their obvious flouting of the rules. I stepped out of our cabin into the darkness to find my counselor, tears of shame streaming down my face. He was shocked at the depth of hurt I felt. And I didn’t understand why. In retrospect I see that he had expected us to break the rules. Yet it felt to me like a grave violation, and I was terrified at the idea of keeping it a secret. It’s not that I was afraid of being punished; it’s not that I needed to lay bare my guilty conscience. I truly felt what we were doing was wrong, and the weight of that injustice felt crushing to my tiny body.

Very little kids often have strong feelings about reward and punishment. They know, for instance, that it’s wrong to take cookies out of the jar without permission because they’ll get in trouble with mommy.

As they enter elementary school age, they tend to focus most on social norms and their enforcement. Now, it’s wrong to take the cookies because the rules say that everyone gets one cookie. This is what psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg called the “conventional” stage of moral development. Right and wrong often feel like black and white for young schoolchildren, as for me in my bunk bed at summer camp years ago. Only when we reach the final stage of moral development, according to Kohlberg, can we identify abstract principles by which to judge authority. Only when we grow older do we understand that, to paraphrase my teacher Rabbi Karyn Kedar, the toughest decisions we make are not those between “right and wrong,” but between “right and right.”

⁴ From the Jewels of Elul

Search your memories. Think of a time when you felt the pure, simple, righteous outrage of a child. Perhaps you were five years old; perhaps 55. I'd like to suggest that that feeling is something we should embrace, and renew.

The more practiced we become at anything, the more easily we can grow rigid and closed off to new possibilities. The same applies to the moral life. Outrage after outrage can wear us down. In today's world, simply watching the news can wear us down.

In our Yom Kippur confession, we cry, "*kishinu oref!*"⁵ as we beg pardon for apathy or hard-heartedness. While doing so we **knock on our chests**, as if to chisel away at the places that have grown callous and calcified.

Here at Temple Israel we worked hard to develop a multi-faceted response to Hurricane Harvey. Then came the earthquakes. And Hurricane Irma. I confess that by the time Hurricane Maria wreaked its havoc, I felt mentally exhausted. [beat chest]: *Kishiti Oref* - my heart was hardened. There is a concept in Zen Buddhism called "beginner's mind." It refers to an "attitude of openness, eagerness, and lack of preconception." Master Shunryu Suzuki teaches, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few."⁶

Our challenge is to cultivate not only a beginner's mind, but a beginner's *heart*. To infuse our instincts with optimism, even as we deliberate with maturity.

The Torah gives us an excellent model for clearing away the inevitable buildup of sadness and frustration that can lead to despair. In the sixth chapter of Leviticus we receive instructions concerning the ancient sacrificial altar: the priest must maintain a fresh supply of wood to ensure the fire burns continuously. That way, the regular sacrifices can proceed on schedule. Crucially, he must also shovel out and discard the ashes promptly. Should he forget to clear away the debris, things could get very messy, very quickly.

The same thing can happen to us. Without realizing it, the ashes of abandoned causes and failed initiatives can suffocate us, crowding the life out of our soul. It is often easier to know when to act than it is to know when to let go. Sometimes we can refresh and reinvigorate our old passions. But often their ashes must be removed so that a new fire can burn..Like the priests, we must find a way to let go.⁷

Since moving to Connecticut three months ago, I've worked hard to find a good exercise routine. We all know how important – and difficult – it can be to take care of our bodies. It can also be easy to overlook that spiritual health is no different! The central discipline of the High Holy Day season is *cheshbon hanefesh*, a **soul** inventory. It's a chance to reflect on our successes, admit our errors, and seek reconciliation. We do this not only because it is the right thing to do, but

⁵ Literally, "we stiffened our necks!"

⁶ I'm grateful here to Alan Lew, whom I paraphrase. See [This is Real and you are Completely Unprepared](#), p. 173

⁷ P. 173

because repairing our relationships is a way to cleanse our souls; to disallow the past from restraining us from living as our best selves.

While *Cheshbon HaNefesh* refers specifically to contrition and forgiveness, many other spiritual practices can sustain us throughout the year. Some people may find value in meditation, reflective writing, or in an intimate conversation with a friend. When I feel depleted, prayer and study reinvigorate me. To paraphrase our ancient Rabbi Shammai, עשה תורתך קבע – whatever your practice, make it a regular practice.⁸

But even that is not enough. As we cultivate a *beginner's heart*, we must supplement it with reasoned, critical decision-making. Otherwise *righteousness* too easily gives way to *self-righteousness*. But how can we know what to do, whom to help, even where to start, when the world is so full of problems? The answer has everything to do with the stories we tell.

A Hebrew word for storytelling is *haggadah*. That word might sound familiar; it is also the name of the dramatic script we bring to life around the Passover Table. As we've recently discussed in our Adult Learning Chavurah here at Temple, the passover experience is a moral exercise on every level. Time and time again, Judaism appeals to our narrative history for moral clarity. For instance, if you read through the Torah, you will find dozens of warnings not to mistreat the foreigner, because we ourselves were foreigners in the land of Egypt.⁹

At Passover time, we tell the story from our *haggadah*, reading that in every generation we are obliged to see ourselves as though we, *personally*, escaped slavery. Moral Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre calls this the “narrative conception” of morality. Humans, he says, are naturally storytelling beings. In his words, “I can only answer the question ‘what am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what stories do I find myself a part?’”¹⁰

On one hand, the exodus story compels me to help those on the margins of our society: the poor, the foreigner, the sick and disabled. Many of these people may be total strangers. But it also reminds me of my special allegiance to my family, and similarly, to the larger Jewish family, our local community, and our country. The truth is that, in the 21st century, we all live within many stories.

This month, our continent has suffered devastating hurricanes. Billions of dollars of damage in Houston and the surrounding area; entire Caribbean islands laid waste. Devastating earthquakes in Mexico. How should we respond? Should we give to the Red Cross? To the Jewish Federation? To a non-profit organization? Should we prioritize Puerto Rico because it is a US commonwealth? Should we find a way to help in Mexico City, because more lives were lost?

In an endlessly interconnected world, our circles of responsibility stretch further than ever before. But they cannot stretch infinitely far. And in a world of limited resources, it *cannot be*

⁸ *Asei Toratcha Keva* - Pirkei Avot 1.15

⁹ BT *Bava Metzia* 59b

¹⁰ As quoted in Sandel, *Justice*, 221

moral to love everybody equally.¹¹ Balancing compassion with strategic thinking is an important way to gain moral clarity and avoid burnout. So when the demands are many, we should ask ourselves the following questions:

1. **What is the right thing to do?** What do our instincts tell us needs to happen? What do experts and those affected recommend?
2. **“Am I a part of this story?”** Do we feel that the problem is, in some sense, *our problem*? Last week Governor Andrew Cuomo of NY personally visited Puerto Rico to deliver aid. He did not visit Houston, or St. Thomas, or Mexico City. Why? In his words, “Puerto Rico is part of the New York family, and we stand with our Puerto Rican brothers and sisters as they begin to rebuild after the devastation of Hurricane Maria.”¹² In other words, he *feels that Puerto Rico is part of the New York Story*.
3. **“Should I become part of this story?”** We may not know anyone in Puerto Rico. But even so, perhaps we are simply moved because, to paraphrase Edmond Fleg, “... in every place where suffering weeps, the Jew weeps [...] at every time when despair cries out, the Jew hopes.”
4. **What is the opportunity cost?** All else being equal, every dollar we spend on a given cause is a dollar less going somewhere else. Empathy is a powerful call to action, but it can also lead us to prioritize our time and giving in ways we may later regret. We must tread carefully.
5. **What will be my commitment to action?** The most important thing, of course, is to act. Give. Volunteer, Organize, Speak out. Give generously, and with purpose.

Following these steps can help us avoid burning the candle at both ends. And that is crucial, because the challenges of today call for considerable moral clarity and even greater moral courage. The new year and the new world require this of us.

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The Hasidic master called the Ba'al Shem Tov told of a disciple who would complain to his teacher: When I am in the house of study, I feel filled with light and life, but as soon as I step out into the world this feeling leaves me. What should I do?

The Rebbe replied: You are like someone who walks through a forest on a dark night, accompanied by companions, all with their own lanterns. Then their paths divide, and each must go on alone for a time. Carry your own lantern, and you need not fear the darkness.¹⁴

¹¹ I give credit to my mentor Rabbi Danny Zemel, who explains the concept of *arevut* (mutual Jewish responsibility) this way. He is heavily informed by the moral philosophy of Avishai Margalit.

¹²<https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-departs-new-york-puerto-rico-provide-emergency-goods-and-services-official>

¹³ Proverbs 20.27a

¹⁴ A Hasidic parable adapted from Rabbi Chaim Stern, *Day by Day*, p. 133