

After thirty-two years of giving High Holy Day sermons, perhaps the most valuable lesson I have learned is that the most important message is often the simplest.

In preparing for this evening's sermon, I found there were so many concerns that weigh me down, that burden my heart: How it is that there are always others who seem to judge Israel more harshly than it deserves; How our nation seems to be headed in a direction that evokes in me profound anxiety; How our world seems to be increasingly threatened by demonic forces bent on destruction. All are truly legitimate matters. But over this past weekend—watching the news reports and images flow in from Pakistan, thinking about those who are still wading through the morass left in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, imagining how horrific it must be for those who have endured mud slides and volcanic flows in Central and South America, and remembering that the most devastating natural disaster in any of our lifetimes was less than eleven months ago—I am humbled and even ashamed to think that *my* concerns and *my* fears somehow merit consideration during these Days of Awe.

Sometimes we don't need to be talking about the complex issues of the day. The real *mitzvah* or commanding Voice of this day challenges us to confront the most basic of questions: How much do I *really* care?

When I was younger, I would occasionally look at the strangers passing me on the sidewalk and wonder, "What's going through his mind right now? What's worrying her?" Trying to at least be *aware* of (let alone *subdue*) my own egocentricity, I would consciously make an effort to appreciate that *every* person I see is a universe unto themselves, each filled with a similar array of thoughts and concerns and joys and pain which I endure every day. Where does it say that I am the center of the world? Do I think that God is concerned only with me? What about all *these* people? What about all *those* people? What about all those people who don't look anything like me? What about those people who don't like me? What about those people trying to destroy me? Are they really any different than am I?

The challenge of this day is to think less about ourselves and more about what it must be like to be someone else. Instead of struggling with our own *meshugas* on this *Yom Kippur*, maybe we should be trying to think about what it must be like to get down on your hands and knees and lift up the rubble that used to be your home or dig through the mud of what used to be your hillside desperately trying to find your child? Instead of worrying about all the stuff that causes us to lose sleep at night, maybe we should be trying to imagine how the proverbial "other half" lives? Instead of thinking about them as the "other half," maybe we should stop to think about the possibility that *we* are the "other" half?

Over the years I have mentioned that the actual meaning of *atonement* is at-one-ment, that the process of *kapparah* is about bringing things back together again. On this day our goal is to try to be at-one with God, with our self. Our challenge is to repair the breach, to find the wholeness we have lost. But can we ever truly hope to realize that *shalom* (which, at its core, actually means to be complete or whole), if we are not at-one with the other? Can we ever truly hope to know *shalom* if the needs of the other, the fears of the other, the cares of the other are not at least somewhere shared in our hearts? Is not true atonement when we are together with the other? Or put another way, if we are not together with the other, if not in deed then at least in thought, is our at-one-ment with God and our self of any value?

Of course, there are limits. There is only so much I can do. It is not humanly possible for us to transport ourselves to every corner of the world to lend aid to those whose lives have just been overturned, nor is it financially possible for most of us to contribute to every worthy cause. But it *is* possible to care. It is possible to fashion our hearts in such a way that the needs of the other can find a way in—and from there the acts of goodness will flow out.

When we sit here and listen to the names being called out during the *Mi Sheberakh*, do we stop and consider that each name represents someone whose life is in distress? Do we stop to appreciate that for every name called there are countless others who are filled with fear and pain for that loved one? When we identify those in our community who are in mourning, do we allow their sorrow to enter our hearts—even when their names are unknown to us? And when we hear of a death in our community, do we

make an effort to pause from our routine in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of comforting the mourner? How much does it take to care? How much does it take to be human?

On this day we come to honestly ask ourselves, to what extent are we living up to our potential as human beings? This is the mandate of our lives. Not to succeed. Not to be happy. Not to win, or acquire or be healthy. Simply to be human. We Jews have a word for it. *Mensch*. And it means to care.

This year Temple Ner Tamid is devoting itself to studying *Pirkei Avot*, a collection of ethical teachings, sayings we can sit down and study together with our children and grandchildren. (In fact, for those of you who have children in our Religious School, that is precisely what we hope you will do in our Ten Minutes of Torah program. You can find a complete Hebrew-English text of *Pirkei Avot* as a downloadable PDF file on the front page of our newly redesigned website.)

Here's one of my favorites: Hillel would say, "*B'makom she-ein anashim, histadel l'hiyot ish*—In a place where no one behaves like a human being, you must strive to be human." (*Avot* 2:5)

Such a simple and profound teaching. Profound, to be sure. But maybe not quite so simple. Tonight I will present to you four different ways to read and understand this text, their cumulative interpretation—I hope—will yield a more comprehensive meaning of what it means to be *human*.

FIRST At its face, the meaning is clear. In places where people fail in their humanity, you must step forward and be human. This is a lesson with which we Jews are well acquainted. We have lived in places devoid of humanity. We have endured the darkness, the isolation. We know what it is like to be marched through villages and towns as people simply stand by and watch. But we also know that there were those who were willing to rise above the fray, to stand up and be counted; not that they did so in order to receive merit, but simply because it was the right thing to do. *Righteous Gentiles*. They have a very special place in our hearts.

Each year, when I take our Confirmation Class to Amsterdam, the educational director of the Anne Frank House shows a short clip from the film "The Courage to Care". The excerpt is of a woman who, in saving some Jews taking refuge in her home, makes the decision to kill the local policeman who would have taken them away. A committed pacifist, she abhors guns and violence, and yet when asked if she would do it again she answers unequivocally "Yes."

I have often wondered if I would have had that "Courage to Care"? Would I have been strong enough to muster the passion for mercy to risk everything that was sacred to me—to save another's life? But as one of these remarkable souls once said, "How could I *not* have taken the risk? How could I live with myself if I did not behave as a human being?"

It was Viktor Frankl, psychologist and Holocaust survivor, who taught that life takes on meaning only when we are able to be self-transcendent, only when we are able to extend beyond our selves and care about others. It is our willingness, to use Maslow's phrase, to actualize our potential as human beings that brings *meaning* to our lives. But as the next interpretation of Hillel's teaching will suggest, the challenge to be human is more than just a process of the discovery of *meaning*.

SECOND In the Rabbinic literature of the *Talmud* and *midrash*, the word *Makom* is a metaphor for God. *Makom* literally means "place", and for the rabbis God is the "Place" of the world. God is our ground, the Place of our being. God is our anchor, the source of our footing. Read with this understanding, then Hillel's teaching points out that *B'Makom*—with God, *she-ein anashim*—where there is no human-ness (meaning, by God's very nature there is only the holy), *histadel l'hiyot ish*—we are the only ones who *can be* human. God cannot be human. Only we can. As such we learn that there is a reason why we exist. There is a purpose to our humanity. God created us *to be* human.

This past summer I read this book *Traveling Mercies*, a personal recollection of spiritual seeking by Anne Lamott. In the course of her searching she relates how one Christian minister presented Jesus to her, particularly within the context of “being saved.” “I guess it’s like discovering you’re on the shelf of a pawnshop,” he says, “dusty and forgotten and maybe not worth very much. But Jesus comes in and tells the pawnbroker, ‘I’ll take her place on the shelf. Let her go outside again.’”

I confess I found that image quite moving. This scene of being alone, forgotten, and then being redeemed is palpable. Of course the metaphor of Jesus taking her place on the shelf is unique to Christianity, but the notion of someone caring, the idea of someone coming in to help you get off that shelf is thoroughly Jewish. Only as our theology takes it, we don’t wait for God to come and redeem us; on the contrary, for Judaism God is waiting for us to do that. We are commanded to care. It is *Mitzvah*.

In Judaism ours as human beings is to be *shitufei Adonai*—partners with God in the process of creation. We are the saving grace of the universe. God cannot redeem the world without us. Or better put, without a world to be repaired there would have been no need to create humanity. As humans what separates us from the other creatures is not our thumb or ability to walk erect but rather our ability to *live* erect. As human beings we have the power to rise above our animal state and aspire toward the holy—to become, as the Psalmist saw us, just a little lower than the angels.

THIRD There is yet another way to translate *B’makom she-ein anashim*. Literally. Rather than taking it in context (which is the *peshat* or straightforward reading of the text), one could translate it for what the words actually say: *B’makom she-ein anashim*—If you are in a place where there are no people, if you are in a place entirely by yourself—you still have to behave like a human being. Alone in a forest, you are still commanded to act with humanity. To care cannot be limited to end results, to outward gestures, to social interaction. The essence of being human begins with a whisper, a *kol d’mama daka*—a still, small voice that only I can hear. In solitude.

I think back to the Tom Hanks film “Cast Away,” about a sole survivor of a plane crash who finds refuge on a deserted island somewhere in the Pacific. Not surprisingly, it will not take him long to develop a relationship with a volleyball which he appropriately names “Wilson”. Even in solitude we have the need to be human. But the key to this interpretation, especially today, is not so much “even in solitude” but especially in solitude. To *act* like a human being is easy; to *be* a human being is hard. And while we might be surrounded by hundreds of other people here today, what transpires within the recesses of my heart is a completely solitary experience. Do I have the strength to be human even in silence? This is the challenge of *Yom Kippur*.

On this day, the day of our at-one-ment, God asks that in our silence, in our process of *cheshbon ha-nefesh* or personal accounting, we think not so much about ourselves but about others. God asks that we put our own problems in perspective, that we put our problems on the shelf *in place of* someone else’s problems, and remember that as human beings our ultimate responsibility is to care about others.

FOURTH And it is this interpretation which yields yet a final possibility: That it is only *when* we are in a place where there are no others—including one’s self—that we are truly capable of becoming an *Ish*. Which is to say, we cannot realize our potential as a human being until we subjugate our ego, our own, often overpowering needs of *self*. Which brings us back to the very beginning. To be able and (more to the point) *willing* to look beyond myself and see the other. In every way possible.

To *become* human—and we must appreciate that the transformation from our animalistic reality to our ultimate potential as spiritual being is a process, contrary to the wisdom of Nike, we can’t just *do* it—necessitates the ability to deny the often all-consuming Me. If we hope to be able to be at-one with the other—be it those in our world who are truly in need, be it those whom we love, be it the ultimate Other (the Only One of the Universe)—then we must first stop looking at our self.

One day a rich but miserly hasid came to the rabbi. The rabbi took him to the window and said, "Look out there." And the rich man looked out onto the street. "What do you see?" asked the rabbi. "People. I see people," said the rich man. Then the rabbi took him by the hand and stood him in front of a mirror. "Now what do you see?" "I see myself," he said. Then the rabbi said, "So it is—in the window there is glass and in the mirror there is glass. But the glass of the mirror is covered with a little silver, for no sooner is the silver added to the glass than you cease to see others but see only yourself."

That silver is all the ephemeral, shiny stuff that we bring in here with us today. It's all the stuff that gets in the way. Our worries. Our needs. Our desires. And it's so thin. It's so insubstantial. So fleeting.

Hence the great ironic truth of this day: We come here with the intention of examining our self so that we may become our self, yet to do that we must be able to see *beyond* our self. Maybe more than anything else, this is what it means to atone, to be *at-one*. To be of one piece, integrated, reunited with our spiritual potential.

It was also Hillel who taught us that "If I'm not for myself, who will be for me?" He understood that our first responsibility is to ourselves. Self-preservation. We cannot count on others to care for us. But, as he goes on, "If I am only for myself, what am I?" Hillel reminds us that while the failure to fulfill the first part of his dictum raises a practical question ("...who will be there for me?"), failure to be self-transcendent, failure to care about others gives call to a profoundly more critical and existential query: *What am I?* Meaning: can I truly call myself *human*, or as our tradition would have it, *Mensch*? And, of course, he concludes, "If not now, when?" To be sure, the command to be human falls in the eternal *Now*, but especially on this day, this *Yom HaKippurim*, this day of our at-one-ment, if we cannot seek the human within us, if we cannot seek the sacred potential in each of our souls, today—then when?

This day is given to us as a renewed opportunity. To ask the only question that matters—am I living up to my sacred potential as a human being?

"*B'makom she-ein anashim, histadel l'hiyot ish.*" Which, when all is said and done, means simply: "Be a *Mensch*!"