

Kol Nidrei Sermon 2017 (5778)

Delivered by Cantor Scott Buckner

On Rosh Hashana I spoke about *Simcha Shel Mitzvah*, the joy of performing a mitzvah, and emphasized how living with joy and laughter can give us perspective and strength to face the daunting problems of the world. With that in mind, I would like to begin today by sharing a quote from my favorite laugh inducing wordsmith - George Carlin who said,

“I put a dollar in a change machine. Nothing changed.”

And now, for some Jewish wisdom about changing the world. When asked how he had such an impact as a great sage and leader in the Jewish world, the Chafetz Chayim answered "I set out to try to change the world, but I failed. So I decided to scale back my efforts and only try to influence the Jewish community of Poland, but I failed there, too. So I targeted the community in my hometown of Radin, but achieved no greater success. Then I gave all my effort to changing my own family, and failed at that as well. Finally, I decided to change myself, and that's how I had such an impact on the Jewish world.”

How many of you have had great success trying to change your spouse, your partner, or your kids? I thought not! I know, I have been trying to change my mother for a while now - working on her to exercise regularly. I keep telling her all of the benefits of moving her body. I have said over and over that even walking every day would reap great benefits, but so far, it's not working out too well. She prefers playing Majong, going out for dinner, and

various other forms of sedentary entertainment. She's entitled to have fun her way, but would it kill her to also walk a mile or two every day?

If anyone has any ideas for me please call me after *yontif* and let me know!

So, if you want to change the world, it's simple, start with yourself. That's what the system in Jewish tradition known as *Mussar* is all about. *Mussar* is an ancient form of Jewish spiritual practice focusing on character development. It's a Jewish discipline of inner work. An especially relevant topic for these Days of Awe, when we are obligated to look deeply at ourselves and do an accounting of the soul – *Cheshbon Hanefesh*.

What's the main reason that a Jew or any person should do inner work, work on their own character?

The Chafetz Chayim reminds us that the work of improving the world begins at home. When we change ourselves, setting an example, and conducting ourselves in the most kind and ethical manner, this self-transformation will affect everyone around us. This is much more effective, of course, than trying to tell other people how to behave. The discipline of *Mussar*; working on character traits known in Hebrew as *middot*, was ultimately thought of as a way to bring harmony and healing to a divided community. In Lithuania in the second half of the 19th century, Rabbi Israel Salanter perceived that *Mussar* could help relieve the tensions that were tearing apart the Jewish community in Europe at that time. He believed that by developing a spiritual life, people could strengthen their own hearts and the community would transcend its divisions.

There is a remarkable verse in Torah upon which *Mussar* is based.

Leviticus 19:2:

*Vay'daber el kol adat b'nei Yisrael, v'amarta aleihem, "K'doshim Tihiyu, ki kadosh ani Adonai Eloheichem.*

God tells Moses: Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy.

The instruction for Moses to speak to the whole of Israel, tells us of the supreme importance of this message: *K'doshim Tihiyu*, You Shall Be Holy.

*Mussar* believes that this is every human being's task in life. We are put on this earth to grow and blossom spiritually – to become holy or whole. Our potential, and therefore our goal is to become as spiritually refined as possible. *Mussar* is there to help us understand, and act on a human impulse that already exists within ourselves - the inner drive to improve, and to make something better of our lives.

*Mussar* literally means "correction or instruction." How does it work?

The Jewish view in *Mussar* practice, is that each of us is endowed with a full range of "*middot*" or traits of character. In Hebrew, the singular form *middah* literally means measure. The idea is that we each have all of the many soul traits cataloged in the *Mussar* literature such as:

Humility, Gratitude, Patience, Honor, Generosity, Kindness, Strength, Tranquility, Trust, Enthusiasm, Order, Awareness and Truth

What distinguishes us from one another is not that you have one trait and I have another, but rather the degree or measure of the traits that exists in each of us.

For example, the angriest person has an excess of anger, but *Mussar* insists there must be some degree of calm in him as well. Just as there must be some anger, even in the calmest person. Similarly, the stingiest person still has at least a grain of generosity.

So, it is not whether we have certain traits, while someone else has different ones, but rather the degree, or measure, of the traits that lives in each of our souls. This is what gives us our distinctive way of being in the world. The goal is not to rid ourselves of certain traits, since each has a role, but rather to correct the measure of each specific trait within us.

Since each of us has ease and comfort with some traits, and difficulty with others, we each have what may be referred to as a “soul curriculum”. We are each assigned to master something in our lives. You’ve already been given your assignment, and you’ve already encountered it, though you may not be aware that what faces you is a curriculum. Since each self and life is unique and individual, each of us has a very different personal curriculum. Waking up to your own personal curriculum, and taking steps toward mastering it, is the central task of your life and the purpose of *Mussar*. Your spiritual curriculum is made up of the issues in your life that keep challenging you, the behaviors that get you into trouble over and over again.

I challenge you in the New Year, to think about which *middah* you need more of in your life. Do you wish you had more patience? How would it be to feel more gratitude every day? Is it hard for you to open your hand in charity for whatever reason, signaling a need to work on generosity? If you really pay attention do you notice in yourself, a need to be right all the time, or to hear your own voice, which indicates an imbalance in humility? Just contact me after the holiday and I can provide guidance to anyone who would like to begin the work of *Mussar*. I also invite you to join our Saturday morning study, where we have been looking at the weekly Torah portion through a *Mussar* lens, engaging in discussion that can often get quite deep and touch the heart. Participants leave on Saturday morning with a suggested list of activities they can use to work on the *middah* we focused on that morning.

For today, I would like to spend a little time examining one *middah* in particular, that I think we could use a lot more of in our world today. The *middah* - *Anavah* – humility. The *mussar* definition of humility may be a bit different than you would expect. In Jewish tradition humility is not about being meek and reserved. When you think of a humble person, do you imagine someone who could be a leader of a company, organization or movement? In fact, the Torah describes Moses as “the most humble person on earth”. Clearly, humility is not about sitting back, and letting someone else lead. Moses confronted Pharaoh and led the Israelites out of slavery.

A classic *mussar* definition of *Anavah*, humility is – “Occupy a rightful space, neither too much nor too little. Focus neither on your own virtues nor the faults of others”. True humility is something like healthy self-esteem. It lives between the extremes of arrogance and self-effacement. To practice *Anavah* we begin to pay attention to how much space we take up. In a conversation or a meeting, do you tend to speak first? Do you speak several times before others speak at all? You may be taking too much space. Do you tend to not talk at all? You may be taking up too little space.

With the great polarization happening in our country we need *Anavah* more than ever. Our local community, being aware of this, has addressed the issue, getting together at the Manchester Library for discussions. Rabbi Michael co-facilitated one such gathering entitled – “Can we talk? Bridging the political divide.” It was a wonderful program, but I like the name given to the subsequent program this week titled – “Can we listen?” True humility, requires that we are open and vulnerable enough to really listen. It’s common to begin forming a response while we are listening to someone talk. We listen with the intent to respond. If we listen instead, with a deep desire to understand someone and validate them, it’s a whole different way of interacting. Just because we listen and validate someone’s feelings, does not mean we are necessarily agreeing with them. It just signals that we value the other person. It also leaves a small opening for us to be influenced and empathic. This is another area where the Rabbis have some wisdom.

Ben Zoma in Pirkei Avot ch. 4, asks, “Who is wise? and answers, “One who learns from all people; as it is said, *mikol melamdai hiskalti*” – a verse from Psalms meaning – from all my teachers I have learned. It means to be open to learning from everyone, which takes great humility.

Some leaders in our generation aren’t exactly setting a good example of humility, which unfortunately only makes things worse. I would highly recommend *Mussar* practice to a significant number of our elected officials, particularly those that make heavy use of their Twitter accounts. But, as we acknowledged earlier, there is only one person we can really change. We can counter this lack of moral leadership, with our own commitment to practice the humility, that we fail to see on television and in social media.

Author Stephen Covey, in his book “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People” expresses this well when he teaches about his habit #5 – *Seek first to understand, then to be understood*. The foundation of this habit is empathic listening. Covey defines empathetic listening as listening with the *intent to understand*, to really understand. In order to really understand he says you need to get inside another person’s *frame of reference*. You need to see the world the way they see it, through their “lens.” Only then, will we be able to get to the second half of the habit, which is to be understood – to influence the other person. If we begin with a willingness to learn from everyone, to listen with the intent to validate and understand, then we stand a chance of influencing others. We can start in our own synagogue and our own community, by listening and understanding deeply. From that place, we are in the best position to heal relationships, build consensus and create change.

Mahatma Gandhi said it well -

“Be the change that you wish to see in the world.”

Together from that place of humility, mutual respect and compassion we can indeed change the world.