

Character Virtues and Meaning The Road to Character

Years ago, as a new young rabbi, I was called to the hospital to comfort a young woman whose husband was nearing death from cancer. She was racked with grief. She sobbed to me, “if only Jews believed in the afterlife, I’d be able to have some peace and let go.”

I took her hand and told her that in fact, there was a variety of Jewish beliefs regarding the afterlife. In fact, our scholars teach that the soul is eternal, eventually returning to our Creator. As we talked, she steadily calmed down. Then with a new-found peace, she said goodbye to her husband and he died that night.

I have thought about that night many times since then, especially as I have faced this very scenario many times over the years. The grief was not just about letting go -- it was about fear -- a terrified feeling that one’s life has been incomplete. What was my life’s purpose and how have I fulfilled it?

These Days of Awe are a response to that fear -- the fear that our lives will be incomplete when we face our end. What is our purpose and how can we realize it? What if I can’t figure it out?

The terror expressed in the Unetaneh Tokef reflects this fear. A central theme of these Holy Days, the Unetaneh Tokef asks: Who will be inscribed in the book of life for good, and who will not?

Ultimately, the wish that we may be inscribed in the book of life for *good is not a plea to God to keep us alive, as much it is a cry for help with life’s fundamental question: What is my life’s meaning and purpose? Why am I here?*

What is the consequence of simply *being*, but not really living? On these Days of Awe we consider: *Am I fulfilling my unique potential as a human being?*

It’s easy to boil this question down to behaviors that we should cultivate: *generosity, kindness, humility, honesty, patience, compassion*, etc. Of course we want to live our lives by these character virtues. But do we? This is the question we ask ourselves today.

We work hard during these holy days to focus on becoming the best person we can be. The recitations of *ashamnu/we have sinned*, and *al cheit/for the sin* help us to feel cleansed. But New Year’s resolutions come and go without touching our soul’s yearnings. That’s why so many of us struggle with mid-life crises – or maybe not even mid-life, when we are left struggling to find our way. This is the deep spiritual quest that brings us together on these Days of Awe.

In the sounding of the shofar on Mt Sinai our people experienced God, and in that moment, they heard a message. It was a vision of a path that will ultimately lead us to a world filled with peace and harmony; an unending hope for our future.

Rabbi Jason Rubinstein¹ writes, “*We are like travelers in a dark forest. We have a destination, a place that marks the end of our journey, a place whose existence and beauty initially inspired us to set out on our travels. But all too often we are so taxed by the effort of clearing the thicket that stands before us, that we lose our bearings.*” The shofar calls us to notice where we have been and what we have accomplished in helping to repair the world of its brokenness. It calls us to be honest in assessing what we need to learn and do to redirect ourselves on the right path in the coming year.

If we want to get to the deeper questions of *our life’s path*, we need to a GPS – for the “*Road to Character.*”

This happens to be the title of a book that came out last year, by David Brooks, NY Times columnist. I met Brooks last year at an event where he spoke about the book and his personal search for meaning. He quipped that being a conservative at the NY Times is like being chief rabbi at Mecca. But this comment belied more than passing humor – he has positioned himself as a kind of secular rabbi, translating Jewish wisdom for the masses.

I was moved to find a humble, searching man standing before me, as he admitted that he wrote this book to *save his own soul*. Maybe it can help us to do the same.

Brooks began by observing that “Some people radiate an inner light. These are people who seem deeply good. They can be from any walk of life. But what’s most noticeable is that they listen to you when you talk – they are not thinking about what wonderful things *they* do. *They are not thinking about themselves at all.*”

Brooks confessed that while he has certainly achieved what he calls a “decent level of career success,” he came to feel that he has not achieved the *generosity of spirit*, or *depth of character* that he admires in these pure souls. He realized that he wanted to be more like them, and set out to discover “moral adventures that produce that kind of goodness.”

He knew he “was going to have to be better at balancing” his life.

Brooks opens the book with a critique of contemporary culture, inspired by the great modern Jewish Orthodox philosopher, *Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik*. In his 1965 book, *Lonely Man of Faith*, Soloveitchik observed that each of us has two opposing sides of our nature -- Adam 1 and Adam 2. This is a midrash on the two Biblical creation stories.

Adam 1 is the goal or career-oriented, ambitious side of our nature, concerned with the *outside world*; while Adam 2 strives to be *good within*, to embody *moral qualities*. Adam 1 is about our *résumé*, our desire to conquer the world; Adam 2 is about our *eulogy* -- *what are we here for?* Eulogy virtues are what will be remembered about us — were we kind, brave, honest or faithful, capable of deep love?

“These two Adams operate by a different and contradictory logic. For us to build a *résumé*

¹ *Jason Rubenstein, 10/2016, Mechon Hadar*

we must cultivate our *strengths*, while building a moral core requires us to confront our *weaknesses*.”

So, here is the problem: “We live in a time that rewards the striving, utilitarian Adam 1, while ignoring and even demeaning Adam 2’s inner life and moral clarity.”

Brooks concluded that the pursuit of resume virtues takes focus, hard work and achievement, but the pursuit of eulogy virtues requires sustained effort and willingness to “engage in moral struggle. *Wonderful people are made, not born. True inner virtue is built slowly.*”

It is too easy to slip into a “self-satisfied moral mediocrity,” separated from life’s meaning, “drifting away from what can be the *potential for real joy*.” This is where will find fulfillment and ultimately, a deep and real form of happiness.

In a culture where we are encouraged to promote ourselves on social media, we are not connecting with each other on a soul level. We have become disconnected, and lonely. Today’s culture of “me” is a seductive distraction from the memory that we exist in a world of “we.” When our ancestors stood at Sinai, we were as one, collectively declaring, *na’aseh v’nishma*/we will do and we will obey. We can only find that path of meaning together.

How do we counteract today’s “culture of the Big Me” as Brooks terms it? In “the age of the selfie,” moral relativism prevails. Selfless, quiet virtues don’t help you to ascend on Twitter. “There is little space for humility in our cultural meritocracy, where success can lead to the greatest failure -- arrogance,” Brooks quipped.

We live in an America that encourages narcissism and rewards self-aggrandizement, a nation that is, Brooks observes, is ‘morally inarticulate.’

Our world tells us to love ourselves. In fact, today’s parents and teachers see it as their job to be sure that kids always know how wonderful they are. Of course, our children should know they are loved unconditionally. But character is developed as we learn to overcome challenges, mistakes and defeats. That love should always be there for us from our parents, family and close friends. But it shouldn’t smother the opportunity for growth and discernment.

Young people are showered with so much praise that a recent study of college students exposed that 65% said they expect to become millionaires, in addition to a dramatic decline from 40 years ago in those who report to be strongly motivated to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. Today, it is perfectly acceptable for college students to say that they are primarily interested in money.²

We have told the next generation to love themselves, and they believe us. But this is a *conditional* love – as deep as the achievements that are expected of them. “Too often, today’s children are *honed*, where affection is mixed with a desire to help children *achieve*

² The Road to Character, David Brooks, Random House, New York. 2015

worldly success. Lurking in the shadows of this love is the possibility that it could be withdrawn if the child disappoints. There is some parental narcissism here, that our children's choice of college, career or material success give parents status and pleasure," Brooks observes. This can produce a fear that there is no completely safe love; no completely secure place where young people can be utterly honest and themselves.

Think about the people whom you admire the most. For Brooks, it is people who are "*profoundly honest about their own weaknesses*. They know and acknowledge their mistakes. They have achieved a profound humility. Worldly success may be achieved through competition with others, but *character* is built through *confrontation* with our own weaknesses."

"People on the *Road to Character* understand that *we need each other*." We cannot fulfill our soul's striving alone. *Character* is formed in community."³

Brooks tell the story of Dwight Eisenhower, who realized early on that his core sin was his temper. He developed a moderate, cheerful exterior because he knew he needed to project optimism and confidence to lead. To tame his anger, he channeled in it small ways. He took the names of the people he hated, wrote them down on slips of paper and tore them up and threw them in the garbage. "Over a lifetime of self-confrontation, he developed a mature temperament. He made himself strong in his weakest places."⁴

The Road to Character is modeled through the exemplary lives of humble, "deeply good people." Brooks tells stories of models for *self-examination, struggle, self-mastery, dignity* and *love*.

One such story told of Frances Perkins, a young woman who was an activist for progressive causes at the start of the 20th century. One day she stumbled across the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, and watched dozens of garment workers die. That experience shamed her moral sense and purified her ambition. *It was her call*.

She became an instrument for the cause of workers' rights. She became the first woman in a United States cabinet, under Franklin D. Roosevelt, and emerged as one of the great civic figures of the 20th century.⁵

Frances Perkins teaches us about vocation. No matter what our experiences, we too can have the awakening moment when we notice our calling. *What is my vocation?* We learn by experience, with eyes wide open and heart open with compassion. The guiding question is: "Where does the world's deepest problem meet my skills and my role?"⁶

We are encouraged to "be true to yourself." Perhaps this a vision that begins with self and

³ The Road to Character, David Brooks, Random House, New York. 2015

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

ends with *self*. “People on the road to inner light *do not* find their vocations by asking, *what do I want from life?* They ask, ***what is life asking of me?*** How can I match my talents with one of the world’s needs? The driving force in their lives is a willingness to acknowledge their *pain and suffering as pieces of a larger narrative. For them defeat leads to recognition and, to redemption. They turn their challenges into occasions of self-understanding.*”⁷

People who face their imperfect natures with self-honesty are what Brooks calls, “*stumblers.*” They don’t build their lives by being better than others, but by being better than they used to be.”

Eventually, when we have exhausted the need to pour ourselves into our career ambitions, setting aside our ego, a parson who is a stumbler “*is overwhelmed by a feeling of unbounded gratitude. These are transcendent moments of deep tranquility.*”⁸ Isn’t his what we are all seeking?

In a review of *The Road to Character*, Jane Eisner of The Forward comments, “*Our worship of materialism and self-satisfaction isn’t just a personal character flaw; it’s embedded in our... public spending priorities and national policies.* The lack of empathy that Brooks decries is reinforced by a culture that does not value shared sacrifice.”⁹

Eisner critiques today’s religious trends, saying that an emphasis on personal satisfaction has de-emphasized communal responsibility. This legitimizes the “me” over the “we.”

The role models Brooks documents as examples are secular. But in fact, our Biblical and rabbinic traditions are the starting points. We have abundant role models that emphasize the value that human weakness and sin are ways to learn our deepest life lessons. Moses, who had to flee Egypt after killing a cruel taskmaster, is an example of a humble servant, wracked with struggle. King David is an archetype of a great hero who is deeply flawed. Our sages lay it out for us: *we depend on each other to thrive.*

In order to cultivate character, we need to unplug. “We need moments of stillness to allow us to hear our internal Adam,”¹⁰ the self that is our soul. Shabbat was a brilliant innovation 4 millennia ago. In our overstimulated world, we need it more than ever.

Our cultural meritocracy promotes the idea that “I” am wonderful, encouraging self-aggrandizement and competition. The self that is defined by achievement is not about

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ “The Road to David Brooks’ Character,” Jane Eisner, The Forward, August 23, 2015.

<http://forward.com/culture/books/306006/the-road-to-david-brooks-character/>

¹⁰ *The Road to Character*, David Brooks, Random House, New York. 2015

character. “Many of us are clearer on how to build an external career than on how to build inner character. But *if you live for external achievement, years pass and the deepest parts of you go unexplored and unstructured.*”¹¹

How can we counter the culture of the “Big Me” and find tranquility? The roadmap is marked by character qualities that will lead to fulfillment.

David Brooks’ offers a roadmap with these fifteen character traits:

“We don’t live for happiness; we *live for holiness*. The long road to character begins with an understanding of our nature – that *we are flawed creatures*. We are *not the center* of the universe. We *know less* than we think we do.

We do sin, but we have a tremendous capacity to overcome sin. The person in *struggle* with themselves is heroic; even sacrificing worldly success for the sake of an inner victory. *Humility* is the greatest virtue. *Pride* is the central vice.

Once necessities for survival are satisfied, the *struggle against sin and for virtue is the central drama* of life. Character is built on the course of *inner confrontation*. The things that lead us astray – lust, fear, vanity, gluttony – are short term. But *qualities of character endure: courage, honesty, humility*.

We are *interdependent* -- we need assistance from God, family, friends, and community.

We are ultimately *saved by God’s grace*. Defeating weakness often means *quieting the self*.

Wisdom starts with *modesty*. The good life is only possible when we embrace *our vocation: What is life asking of me?*

The *best leaders understand human nature* and lead for constant, incremental change. The person who *struggles against weakness* and sin may not become rich and famous, but *s/he will become mature*. The mature person is able to *make decisions* without relying on the negative or positive reactions of others – but *based on refined criteria of what is right.*”¹²

Brooks concluded his comments with this assertion: “*Religious souls find tranquility and joy; we are born to aim for it.*”

In his essay, “*Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*,” the great rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that,

“The most urgent task is to destroy the myth that accumulation of wealth and the achievement of comfort are the chief vocations of man. How can adjustment to society be an inspiration to our youth if that society persists in squandering the material resources of the world on luxuries in a world where more than a billion people go to bed hungry every night?

Our life is beset with difficulties, yet it is never devoid of meaning... Our existence is not in vain. Its meaning may not be explicable to us, yet even when we do not know what it is, we know that it is. There is a divine earnestness about our life. This is our dignity. To be invested with dignity means to represent something more than

¹¹ ibid

¹² ibid

oneself. The gravest sin for a Jew is to forget what he represents.... We are God's stake in human history."¹³

We all seek tranquility and joy. They are the substance of that invisible thread that pulls us here, to this holy place, at this sacred moment. Our souls yearn to feel whole. The path to our wholeness is marked by character strengths and virtues; *wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence*¹⁴ -- these and more are qualities that will help us to attain fulfillment in a meaningful life.

May this Day of Atonement be a day of discernment and growth. Warm wishes for a meaningful fast, and may you be sealed in the Book of Life for good.

¹³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity," essay in book by the same title, ed. Susannah Heschel. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. New York. 1996

¹⁴ *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman