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“Good Exhausted”

It’s a story you may have heard me tell before – but not from the bima. One of my projects during my first two-month stint on sabbatical two Januaries ago was to travel for a few days with each of my children, one-on-one. The first trip was with my middle child, Benjamin. He was barely ten years old at the time. It was just a week into 2011, and we traveled to Washington, D.C., a city Ben was hungry to visit. And we saw the monuments and memorials, toured the Smithsonian... even caught a Georgetown Hoyas basketball game. But on the day we visited Capitol Hill, Ben insisted on wearing a jacket and tie.

“That is how they dress,” he asserted.

I replied, “This is my sabbatical. I will do anything for you – except wear a tie.”

While on the Hill, we made a short stop at the Rayburn Building, so we could poke our heads in at the outer office of Representative Henry Waxman. It was the very first day of the 112th Congress. I just wanted Ben to see where his own congressman’s office was located.

When we arrived there unannounced, the receptionist asked if she could help me. “Oh no,” I replied sheepishly, “I’m just showing my son where his congressman works. We don’t have an appointment with anyone here.” But then I paused and added: “You know, I was here a month ago with the tenth grade students from my temple – I take them to Washington each year to lobby on social justice issues. And the Representative is always so gracious about allowing the students to meet with his staff in his personal office, with all of the framed photos of signed legislation that he sponsored. If, by chance, the Congressman is out of the office, and it isn’t too much of a bother, could my son peek into his office for just a moment?”

She asked my name, and then said, “Please wait – I’ll check.” She returned a minute later, and said, “The Congressman will see you now.”

Well, that was more than I was bargaining for. But Ben was ready to talk policy. Representative Waxman invited us to sit down and asked my ten-year-old if he was enjoying his tour of the nation’s capital. Ben replied, “The new Congress is going to repeal health care, isn’t it?”

That was more than the Congressman was bargaining for. “Well,” he said, “they will certainly try to repeal it. And they’ll have enough votes in the House, but not in the Senate. So when that fails, they’ll attempt to strangle the reform financially, since the House controls appropriations.” This continued for about twenty minutes or so... a private civics lesson for my ten-year-old son from his Congressman. And when Ben was finally finished with his interrogation, the Representative invited his staff photographer into the office to take a photo of the three of us: the Congressman, the young boy, and the father who was now very embarrassed not to be wearing a tie.

Not surprisingly, Ben was buzzing about our unplanned meeting with his Congressman for the rest of the trip. “That’s what I want to do when I grow up,” he said. “I want to be in Congress – and then be President of the United States.”

I remember thinking to myself, “That’s not very original. Every kid wants to be President.” But I also remember thinking, “Really? Congress? All that corruption. All the special interest money. All the influence peddling. And pandering. And gridlock. He’s young,” I thought. “He’ll grow out of it... and choose a more honorable career.”

And as these thoughts filled my mind, a deep sadness took hold of my heart. You see, when I was a kid, I dreamed of being a Congressman. Back then, to me, it seemed like there was no finer thing you could be. And then I grew. And I changed. And the game of politics continued to grow and change. And now, there is hardly an institution in America which evokes less trust or confidence than the United States Congress. You’ve all seen the polls, which suggest that as many as 90% of us have had it with our nation’s legislative branch. We don’t see Congress as even basically functional anymore. And I wish I could say it was just Congress that inspires our disdain, but public leadership on practically every level has left us feeling pretty hopeless.

We see the divide between rich and poor growing to previously unimaginable levels. We see an economic recovery that is mostly jobless, which makes it not much of a recovery. We see men and women in the world’s richest country going bankrupt or dying simply because they had the misfortune to get sick. We see bald, unmasked ideology driving our nation’s courts. We see billions of dollars freely corrupting decision-makers. We see a country in which political survival seems to be a higher priority than solving all these problems. And then the surest sign that Americans have truly given up on their public institutions is a presidential race which will be determined not by whose agenda or vision creates confidence, but by which side does a better job of turning out “supporters” who think the outcome matters so little that they’re not even inclined to show up to vote. Thus, we get hundreds of millions of dollars poured into ads telling you only why the other guy is worse. Now go vote.

It’s no wonder that so few of us dream of our children serving in Congress anymore. We see what public life has become, and we doubt it’ll get better anytime soon. But it’s not just that politics has become less venerated as a career – most of us are hesitant to involve ourselves at all in matters of public policy. We talk about these issues

all the time, but we see little that is actually worth doing. “What difference will it make?” we say. “What can actually be changed? The outcome is already rigged with money and favors and political expediency. Why bother?” we mostly say.

It is the clinical definition of cynicism. Psychologist Michael Bader describes it as “a belief that the world is fixed, and that ultimately, there’s not a lot that one can do, despite one’s suffering and wishes for relief.” And among psychological afflictions, cynicism is one of the most insidious, for no one really wants to admit to having it. We much prefer to call ourselves realists, not cynics. And even when we’re willing to acknowledge our cynicism, we claim that it’s well warranted. We don’t seek to “cure” it. And as any psychologist will tell you, it’s pretty hard to fix something that you don’t believe is broken.

Indeed, cynicism is actually a most attractive illness – because it carries with it a tantalizing feeling of superiority. The cynical comment is generally offered with a knowing smirk that says, “I’m smarter than this bill of goods I’m being sold.” It is to be an intellectual. From Friedrich Nietzsche to Oscar Wilde, many of history’s greatest minds have also been its greatest cynics. As columnist Molly Ivins once wrote: “It’s hard to argue against cynics – they always sound smarter than optimists because they have so much evidence on their side.”

It wasn’t always this way. Cynicism actually began as a product of Greek philosophy. The early Cynics – Diogenes and his contemporaries in the 4th century BCE – were counter-culturalists who argued for self-discipline in their own decadent times. Social critic Paul Loeb, in his book, *The Soul of a Citizen*, described the pioneers of cynicism as thinkers who “offered a moral alternative to the empty materialism, legalism, and religious hypocrisy that had come to dominate Greek society. Back then, to be a Cynic meant to stand up for one’s convictions.”

Sadly, today, cynicism means the exact opposite. The cynic is the one who *refuses* to stand up for his or her convictions. The cynic sees no point in doing so. What would it change?

Well, this is the season of change, these High Holy Days. So as we greet this new year, and work our way through prayers and meditations and admissions and vows – all designed to help us change – we must ask ourselves: How is it that a person of principle – a person of conscience – can choose cynical inactivity, even on the issues he or she claims to be most urgent, over fighting to be a part of the solution... not resting until being a part of the solution? How do we do that? Why do we do that?

The scholars have their theories. Political Scientist Matthew Flinders of the University of Sheffield suggests that a part of the problem is our warped expectations of the political process... expectations we place on politicians, but rarely on ourselves. He describes us as “politically decadent” – a generation whose sense of entitlement grows as rapidly as its sense of responsibility diminishes. He sees us rushing to believe the worst about

practically anyone who chooses to make a living in politics. He sees us choosing to be childish when it comes to understanding and accepting the balancing of interests, the unavoidable give-and-take necessary for democratic government to succeed. And he sees us ignoring what the political process has actually accomplished. That is to say, take a look, for instance, at what the United States government has done over the past one hundred years to advance the cause of justice, equality and opportunity – think of the fights that have been won in the past one hundred years for women, for people of color, for the impoverished, for the elderly, for Jews. We've got plenty more to do, that's for sure. But it's a long list of achievements. A long list. A black man is running for re-election as President – and whether you plan to vote for him or not, it's a choice that was inconceivable *fifty* years ago, much less one hundred.

So it seems that part of our cynicism is just a reluctance to grow up – to accept that change, while hard, is possible... that change has happened, and will happen again, and that people like us make it happen.

But there's another factor that fuels our cynicism – and that's our deep aversion to losing. UC Irvine personality researcher Salvatore Maddi teaches that our inclination toward being cynics is stoked every time we try and fail at something. We all know how hard it is to put ourselves back out there after not getting the interview, or suffering through the breakup, or being passed over for the promotion. We feel helpless in the face of these kinds of defeats – as if our best will never be good enough – and it takes extraordinary courage to risk losing again. And if these personal losses can kindle our cynicism, the futility we see in the grand civic or global problems is an even greater trigger. After all, I have way more control on the personal front. If I apply for just one more job today, I might actually get it. But if I decide that today I want to end homelessness in Los Angeles, I can barely make even a dent in the problem on the best of days.

So we end up worn down by defeat. And we sit the next round out. We're too busy. We have other commitments. We don't have time to waste on things that won't change. We choose the comfort of declaring the problem unsolvable over the discomfort of acknowledging that we might just be unwilling to suffer enough, persevere enough, risk enough in order, finally, to win.

Best-selling author and social commentator Philip Van Munching puts it this way: "Cynicism is a belief in ... nothing... The world, according to the cynic, is a cold and cruel place. (But) people who are cynical... make their own lives cold because they lack courage. It takes courage to believe in things: sometimes things will disappoint you, sometimes people will let you down. To have faith is to risk having your heart broken, and the cynic isn't willing to take that risk."

Well, we're here to have faith. We're here because we don't want to believe in nothing. And the forces preventing us from having the world that we want – the ones who want to suck the resistance out of us in order to clear the way for their power or greed – they're *counting* on us to believe in nothing. That's how they get us

out of the way. For they know what Edmund Burke meant when he wrote: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good (people) to do nothing.”

So it won't be easy. And to be sure, there's no magic formula for ridding us all of our cynicism. There is only a discipline that we can adopt – a promise we can make to ourselves, at this season of promises – and it has three steps. The first is really what these holidays are all about. We must begin, each of us, by looking at ourselves more honestly than we usually do. We must ask and answer: What is my weakness where cynicism is concerned? What it is that's attractive about it to me? What it is about *me* that makes me vulnerable to it?

If we're honest, we'll face some tough truths here tonight. Some of us will admit that we're cynical about the world's problems because it enables us to stand in judgment of other people. We get to be smarter than them. We get to be more righteous. We get to hold on to our ideological purity – the luxury of those who wish to decry the world's ills without making the deep compromises that actually solve problems. But perhaps, when this night is through, if we're honest, we'll remember the piercing words of Israeli poet laureate, Yehuda Amichai:

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined house
Once stood.

Yes, if we're honest, we'll face some tough truths tonight. Some of us will admit that we're cynical about the world's problems because we're lazier than we should be – we know that truly changing this world requires a whole lot of work that we don't want to do, so we'd rather defend our honor by just saying it can't be done.

Some of us will even admit that we're cynical about the world's problems because, in our heart of hearts, we don't actually care about them all that much... not unless they affect us directly. We'd never say it out loud, but for some, the truth is: "I've got it pretty good. And I'm a little ashamed of how much I *don't* really care about what's happening to this world. So I deal with that by aligning myself in word with the righteous, as some sort of denial that I've actually made peace with the world's problems."

There's a reason why you succumb to cynicism – maybe multiple reasons. Step one is being honest about those reasons. It's the only hope for transcending them and getting started on changing the world.

Step two is creating a realistic definition of what change actually looks like. This one's hard for us, because we are driven to be problem-solvers. We see what's wrong and expect to fix it. Only some problems – the most entrenched ones – have multiple faces and are not so easily diagnosed. So we try to make the problem go away, while what we really ought to be doing is chipping away at it, making things just a little bit better.

It's not a very sexy notion – "give up on solving the big problems, just try to make them a little less bad." But there's a maturity to that kind of resolve – a wisdom that acknowledges difficulty and keeps us from being consumed by it. It's what I described in our most recent temple Bulletin, when I cited the words of my teacher, Tal Becker, regarding the epicenter of Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the West Bank city of Hebron, which I visited with a group of rabbis this summer. Becker was Israel's lead negotiator during the Annapolis peace process of 2007 – he was the one trying to make it work between Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas. And when we asked him to tell us what the solution would be in Hebron, he said soberly, "Hebron is not a place you go looking for solutions. In fact, the talk of some imminent solution – that we know what it is, and that it's reachable – is part of what prevents us from actually reaching a solution. The first thing we must be able to do is just *hold the pain* – to hear and feel the truths, the rightness of everyone involved, the suffering of all of them. That," said Becker, "will enable us to see what we can do right now to make things just a little bit better. And that, more than anything else, will ultimately make solutions possible."

I heard from many of you after the Bulletin came out. Some were moved by the profundity of Becker's words. Others were dismissive of them – dismissive of holding the pain instead of healing it. For my part, I saw Becker's counsel through the lens of the community organizing work we've been doing here at LBT for the past year. We've spent this past year holding the pain – hearing the stories, hundreds of them, about deep economic distress, about a health care system suffering both fiscally and morally, about education in disrepair. Holding the pain was what got us ready to act. So we started researching what to do about these things, and the problems looked really, really big. Unsolvable. Until we realized that solutions come from winning, so you have to pick things you can win. And the winnable things are not always so big... they make things just a little bit better... but string a bunch of them together, and you're likely to be on to something.

So that's what we're doing – and we need you to help us do it. We've joined with a group of like-minded solution-seekers called One LA. Already, we've partnered with them once – to demand change from state and local public health officials – and stay tuned, there will be plenty more of that to come. But at the moment, another opportunity has arisen. One LA is ready to follow us into action on a project we've proposed for improving both the economy and the quality of life in LA. Rail transit throughout our city – including right here, all along the Sepulveda Pass. Now, I wonder why we at Leo Baeck thought of such a thing? And I know, of course, that no one in *this* room has a problem with cynicism... which is why absolutely nobody's thinking: "Rail transit? Really? This is how we're going to heal the economy? Oh, great. As if the construction isn't bad enough already. The orange cones will haunt us forever. Why can't we just leave bad enough alone?"

Why? Because only a cynic would argue for leaving bad enough alone. And yes, real change does require some suffering to get there. But you can get there... and on this one, we can definitely get there. In fact, funds are already appropriated – it's just that the government currently plans to spend those funds in the year 2039. We'd like it a little sooner than that. So we're gearing up to push for the whole project city-wide to be expedited. Massively.

Now, will rail transit throughout Los Angeles, even along the Sepulveda Pass, just remove our traffic problems here at Leo Baeck? Mashiach couldn't remove our traffic problems at Leo Baeck. But you better believe it'll make things a little bit better. And will expediting the rail project fix our economy? Not by a long shot. But doing it all now, instead of waiting, will create tens of thousands of new green jobs in our city – now, when the jobs are needed. Yes, it will make things a little better. And then maybe we can make things a little better again.

You found a card on your seat tonight. Our Community of Elders is hosting a forum for all of our city's mayoral candidates on October 14th. We need you there. We'll discuss all of our city's major issues, but we want to stand as one on transit. And if there are hundreds of us standing as one, be assured, it's going to matter to our next mayor. So, please sign the card tonight... tell us you'll be there... and take home the flyer you'll receive as you leave the sanctuary – it will provide you with a lot more information – and help us make things a little bit better in Los Angeles. It's one of the most famous teachings from our ancient rabbis: *Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben chorin l'hibateil mimena* – we cannot be expected to solve the world's huge problems on our own, but we cannot fail to do our part. A little bit better – that we can do.

Which brings us to the third and final step – and that is never, ever giving up. Make no mistake... if we choose to dabble in the business of changing this world, we're going to lose again and again and again. There is inertia behind the status quo. There will be people desperate to stop us – to demoralize us and get us to quit. Getting the next mayor to support us on expediting rail transit may not be enough. Some other, unknown force may stand in our way. We may lose, after pouring years of our life into this. And if not on this fight, then on the next

one. And every time we lose, we're going to have a decision to make. Will we get wounded? Will we get bored? Will we get sanctimonious? Will we get lazy? Will we get jaded? Or will we get busy?

Our tradition is literally overflowing with sage voices begging us to get busy at those moments when we're ready to quit. The great teachers from the Holocaust... Primo Levi and Viktor Frankl and Leo Baeck... they all taught the Torah of never giving up. The legendary Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav famously wrote: "It is forbidden to despair. Never give up hope." And he suffered from clinical depression. That didn't stop him.

There will surely be those moments when we will prove not to be made of that kind of stuff – when we'll seek the emotional cover of the cynic, when we'll revert to our safe seat on the sideline, ready to cast judgment on the whole sorry lot that ran us off. But when those moments come, maybe – just maybe – we'll be able to hear the pleading voice of Rabbi Shlomo of Karlin: "If you want to raise a person from mud and filth, do not think it is enough to keep standing on top and reaching a helping hand down to the person. You must go all the way down yourself, down into mud and filth. Then take hold of the person with strong hands and pull the person and yourself out into the light."

I've got a kid who wants to be President of the United States. That's original. Maybe he's just like every other eleven-year-old with an overgrown dream he'll someday abandon. And maybe he's not. Somebody has to be President. But one thing is for certain – I am not going to be the one who tells him to choose a more noble profession. He wants to change the world when he grows up. What do we want to do when we grow up?

One of the greatest heroes of my life was the story-songwriter Harry Chapin. Most people know him as the guy who sang *Cat's in the Hat*, history's most depressing song. I knew him as the guy who played over two hundred shows a year, more than half of them benefits... who founded an organization called World Hunger Year. Why? Because he knew that no matter how successful he might be in fighting world hunger, every year would still be World Hunger Year. He devoted his whole life to a fight he *knew* he'd never win. He named his organization as a testimonial to that futility – and kept on fighting. He was the inspiration behind Harry Belafonte and Bob Geldof, the artists who ultimately created LiveAid and We Are the World. It was a victory Chapin wouldn't live long enough to see. And yes, all these years later, it's still World Hunger Year. But I can assure you Chapin made things more than a little bit better.

When asked about how he lived with such relentless principle and determination – never giving up, no matter how hard the fight became, no matter how many defeats he suffered – Chapin used to tell a story about his grandfather, a painter who had illustrated Robert Frost's first two books of poetry. He said that his grandfather once looked at him and said, "Harry, there are two kinds of tired: there's good-tired, and there's bad-tired." He said, "Ironically enough, bad-tired can be a day that you won. But you won other people's battles... other

people's agendas... and when it was all over there was very little 'you' in there, and when you hit the hay at night, somehow you toss and turn – you don't settle easy." But then he said, "Good-tired, ironically enough, can be a day that you lost. But you don't have to tell yourself, because you know you fought your battles, you chased your dreams, you lived your days, and when you hit the hay at night, you settle easy – you sleep the sleep of the just, and you can say 'Take me away.'"

In this new year 5773, let's get good exhausted.