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“Good Ancestors”

My guess is that when most of you think about your list of “required reading” – the newspapers and periodicals and websites and authors who you regularly read and work hardest not to miss – the weekly edition of the *Jewish Journal* does not make the list. I say that not because the *Jewish Journal* isn’t the type of high-level, professional publication that deserves your time and attention. It is, and it does. I say it because, quite honestly, for most American Jews, the *Jewish Journal* is, well, too Jewish to win and keep their focus.

In fact, that’s exactly what my friend Rob Eshman, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Jewish Journal*, was pointing out in his column just this past week. Just as a matter of curiosity, by show of hands, how many of you happened to read Rob’s column this week?

Well, it was one not to be missed, because it raised a few worthwhile questions about this whole enterprise that has brought us all together on this Kol Nidre evening. The column begins like this: “Most of us who go to synagogue for the High Holy Days have no clue what’s going on. We don’t speak or read Hebrew well enough to understand the prayers or the Torah portion. We don’t know why we say the prayers in the order we say them. We don’t like the stilted English translations. Many of us don’t even believe in God, or religion.” He then goes on to cite statistics from a recent Gallup poll which reveals Jews to be America’s least “religious” religious group. The survey indicates that only 38% of us consider ourselves to be religious, while 54% of us see ourselves as nonreligious. Two percent of Jews reported as atheist – which only means that the Jews of Leo Baeck Temple were grossly underrepresented in Gallup’s flawed polling sample. And yet with all of this, the poll showed that almost 80% of America’s Jews attend services on the High Holy Days.

It brings to mind the late Admiral James Stockdale, Ross Perot’s vice-presidential running mate in 1992, who made the phrase, “Why am I here?” into a national phenomenon. Said Rob Eshman, “Most of us spend a dozen hours in synagogue and hundreds of dollars on tickets to pray in a language we don’t understand to a God we don’t believe in.”

As your rabbi, I don’t know whether to be grateful or deeply concerned about you. Of course, we know that Eshman is not talking about all of us. Many who are here tonight find great meaning in Jewish communal prayer – enough to be regulars on Friday nights or at our Shabbat Morning Minyan. But even so, I doubt that

many of us would argue that Eshman and the people at Gallup don't know what they're talking about when it comes to the "nonreligious" majority. So the natural question for us all to ask, of course, is: "Why?" Really... what is this about? Why *are* you here tonight? Is it the comfort of routine? Is it good old fashioned Jewish guilt? Is it the feeling of belonging to something bigger and more timeless than yourself? Is it the gnawing suspicion that your grandparents would roll over in their graves if you didn't come? Why?

Eshman proposes an answer. He suggests that *teshuvah* – the exercise of turning... of returning... to our truest aspirations for ourselves, to what we know is "righter" than we have allowed ourselves to become – this, he suggests, is an eternal hunger, and not just for Jews. It is a human longing to take stock of the distance that exists between the vision we believe to be our essence and the reality of who we are. We want to change. We want to grow. We want to have good reason to feel better about ourselves.

And so we come. We listen to the call of the shofar, with the hope that its piercing sound might inspire us to set ourselves straight. We come. And then we come back the next year – because the distance between what is and what we want to be has not really diminished all that much, if at all. It might have even grown larger. But regardless of its size, its content is numbingly consistent. We are, each of us, thinking about the same failings in our character this year that we were thinking about last year. And the year before. We come back *because* the content doesn't change. Because we don't change – at least not as much as we had hoped.

Of course, if we're willing to be realistic about this, we'd admit that counting on these holy days to change us is an absurd expectation. We know this – we just prefer not to think about it. Said the 19th century rabbinic sage, the Alter of Navaradok: "The problem with people is that they want to change overnight – and have a good night's sleep that night, too." Unfortunately, the real changes we yearn for during these contemplative hours of Yom Kippur require a whole lot of lost sleep over many, many nights. But rarely do we go much beyond this one day, this one season, to turn those yearnings into reality. We prefer to allow ourselves to believe that our sincere and soulful struggles on this day might be enough to get the job done, even though we know better from plenty of past experience.

This, I believe, is the primary reason why so many self-described "nonreligious" people pile into synagogues on Yom Kippur. The most aspirational part of our souls still aches to grow. The most self-protective part of our souls wants to feel better when we don't. And so we come. And then we return into hiding... only to come again, when the shofar beckons.

Of course, the truth is that it's not the temple or Judaism or religion that we're actually hiding from. It's ourselves. Because deep in our hearts, we know that our familiar patterns – the ones we come here to lament and stare at and transcend, only to return to them with a clearer conscience after we break the fast – are blocking our way to the life we want. They are wounding the relationships we want most to honor. They are crippling our effectiveness in the work we do in the world, and standing in the way of our success. They are causing us not to like ourselves at times... sometimes all the time. Is it any wonder that after a full day of sitting with these painful truths, we've had just about enough?

The 19th century Chasidic master, the Rhiziner Rebbe, once came home from his shtibel and found a little boy sitting outside his home weeping.

“Why are you crying, my son?” the Rhiziner asked.

“Because I was playing hide and seek,” the boy answered.

“I don’t understand,” replied the rebbe. “Why the tears?”

“Because I was hiding. But no one was seeking.”

This, the Rhiziner Rebbe taught, is the sadness that keeps bringing us back here on this day. For we know that there is something – someone – from which we are hiding all year long. And no one is seeking. Not even us.

Yom Kippur is supposed to be more than just a momentary annual oasis from our hiding. It’s supposed to be the entry point into a yearlong process of self-discovery – of confronting the truths we lay bare to ourselves on this day. Tomorrow morning, we will read the familiar words of this holy day’s Haftarah, words attributed to the prophet Isaiah. We usually focus upon the impassioned plea for social justice that emerges from these words: “...to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, to break every cruel chain... to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the homeless poor into your house, to clothe the naked.” But then right there, immediately following this crescendo of “other-centered” concerns, Isaiah finishes by turning the camera lens directly on ourselves: “*Umi’b’sar’cha lo titalam.*” The words are often translated: “Never hide yourself from your own kin,” but a much more faithful rendering of the actual Hebrew is: “Never hide from your own flesh.” Never hide from *yourself* – for it is not just our personal lives or professional fates or even our self-images that suffer when we retreat from the honesty we invite on this day. It is also our capacity to be all that we can be – all that we must be – in a world where suffering is the norm, where unfairness reigns, where the very injustices we decry most indignantly are in part fashioned by our own weakness, our own complicity, our own greed, our own disinterest.

So no, this Yom Kippur day will not remake us all by itself. We need more. But if Rob Eshman is right, most Jews are not prepared to go looking for that “more” in their synagogues. Too religious. If we decide to get really courageous and determined, and truly devote ourselves to a pathway that leads to real change this year, there are a number of options we might be more likely to consider. Therapy. Meditation. Journaling. Studying the best teachings on the subject. Talking openly and honestly with a trusted partner – a cherished loved one or friend. These seem like better alternatives for us “nonreligious” people. Except each and every one of these practices is a part of the traditional Jewish practice aimed at self-growth. In fact, Judaism actually taught these disciplines long before popular culture ever did – and as an added bonus, to do them, you don’t even have to attend a single prayer service (although, as the famous Jewish maxim goes, “it couldn’t hurt”).

What I'm talking about is the Jewish ethical literature and practice known as Mussar. The term comes from the very beginning of the Book of Proverbs, and it means "moral correction or instruction." For at least a thousand years, some of Judaism's greatest sages have distinguished themselves as authorities less on matters of religious observance and more on how to live a principled life of personal transformation – how to establish the kind of habits that will enable us to continue growing as human beings throughout our lives. In short, Mussar is Judaism's prescription for how we can take everything we agonize about on this day and actually do the real work of changing it.

In the second half of the 19th century, led by the legendary Lithuanian rabbi, Israel Salanter, Mussar was born as a movement. Its leading scholars collected the great moral/ethical teachings of Judaism's past millennium, and they began to create both a philosophy for self-change and a series of practices that could equip us to change in the ways we seek. And while these Mussar teachers were certainly observant Jews themselves, the pathway to moral and behavioral development that they proposed was not based on how kosher your food was, or how well you knew the Hebrew prayers, or how much rabbinic literature you had mastered. In fact, there's a parable that has circulated in the world of Mussar for most of the past two centuries – it tells of a yeshiva *bochur* running boastfully to his rabbi, declaring, "I have gone through the Talmud five times!" The rabbi responds to him by asking, "And how many times has the Talmud gone through you?" Even the medieval giant of Jewish scholarship, Ramban, castigated those who live immorally but within the Jewish letter of the law – "scoundrels with the license of Torah," he used to call them.

So if you think organized religion, "Jewish-style," exists somehow to browbeat you into seeing religious observance as the magic elixir for becoming the person you are striving to be, perhaps it's time to take another open-minded look at Judaism. You see, the tradition of Mussar is founded upon what we might all agree is a religious premise – the premise that Cantor Kates will read from our Holocaust Torah scroll tomorrow afternoon. *Kedoshim tih'yu* – "you shall be holy" – it is the foundational belief that we humans possess an inherently holy essence... that we are capable of becoming the beautiful souls we have come here tonight hoping to become. But realizing that capability is not predicated on how well we pray tonight or even how noble our intentions might be. We get there through the steady, hard work of removing the obstacles that stand in our way – the extremes in our emotions and habits which need "retuning" if we are to become balanced people.

The Hebrew word used in Mussar to describe our character traits is *middot*, which doesn't actually mean "character traits." It means "measures." Why? Because according to the teachings of Mussar, practically every imaginable human trait possesses the power to inspire us both to good or to bad, depending upon the measure of it in our lives. For instance, anger, in its proper measure, can lead us to combat injustice. Strength, in its improper measure, can make us rigid and unyielding. Jealousy, in its proper measure, can impel us to greatness... can drive us to squeeze the very most out of ourselves. Loving kindness, in its improper measure, can paralyze us with sentimentality. The key is to adopt a practice and process in our lives that can enable us to calibrate and recalibrate properly. This is our life's curriculum, according to the Jewish path of Mussar. This is how we can escape the endless cycle that brings us back to this sanctuary each year, troubled by the same failings that burdened us last year.

This is a language that most of us are used to our therapists speaking, not our rabbis. But long before Sigmund Freud came along and taught about the unconscious, the teachers of Mussar were there, describing “a dark inner region that is the source of much that appears in the daylight of our lives.” This inner adversary is called the *yetzer hara*, the inclination to evil. And according to the teachings of Mussar, the *yetzer hara* fights dirty. The great 18th century sage, the Vilna Gaon, taught that the *yetzer hara* won’t bother trying to entice you into doing something truly awful... because you’re not going to take the bait. No, the *yetzer hara* feasts on you where you are weakest and most vulnerable – at the exact spot where your inner battle resides... where you have a real choice to make, and you know which is right and which is wrong, and you could really go either way. You can feel that inner voice, saying, “Who will know? Who will really be hurt? Don’t I deserve this gain anyways?” The *yetzer hara* – your inner adversary – knows your soft spot... knows where you are likely to give in, and feel awful about it later. Mussar practice is about learning how to find the *yetzer hara* before it finds you – a skill that would definitely send you into next Yom Kippur feeling much better about how you had used this new year, now born.

So how do you think this bunch of 19th century Eastern European Mussar rabbis suggested we can do this? The answer might surprise you. They proposed a brief daily routine... one requiring less time than we give without hesitation to our errand-running, or our physical exercise, and certainly less than the amount of time we spend sitting in our cars. For them, it wasn’t about devoting hours and hours at a time, the way we do on Yom Kippur. It was about regularity – making our personal growth a daily commitment, no less than cleaning our bodies or brushing our teeth. And that daily practice was to include a rotation of activities that, together, would create a weekly regimen that would enable our second nature to be changed. A new routine would enable new impulses to become routine.

Sounds logical enough. So what are the activities? And how many of them involve kissing the Torah, or bowing to the ark, or “praying in a language we don’t understand to a God we don’t believe in?” Answer: none. Here’s the list: study of texts written by the Mussar masters (best done with a partner or a group)... meditation... silence... journaling... and visualizing. That’s it. All activities that your therapist or yoga instructor or life coach might recommend; Rabbi Israel Salanter and his disciples have been recommending them for the past 150 years. And what kind of time are we talking about here? Said Eliyahu Dessler, one of the leading Mussar teachers of the early 20th century, even ten minutes a day of this type of mental exercise can be transformative – so perhaps if we’re willing to walk before we run, we can get into a very simple routine and start to know ourselves... and like ourselves... a bit more than we do right now.

There is one additional activity connected to Mussar practice. One of the earliest Mussar sages called it “bearing the burden of the other” – getting into the habit of performing generous acts that benefit others and not yourself. This is how we avoid turning Mussar into a festival of self-absorption. Taught Rabbi Salanter: “A pious Jew is not one who worries about his fellow man’s soul and his own stomach; a pious Jew worries about his own soul and his fellow man’s stomach.”

Now, the irony of a Kol Nidre sermon about Mussar is that on some level, it reinforces the very message it is intended to undermine. That is to say, if the great takeaway tonight is that these words have been thought-provoking, inspiring, even challenging, and worthy of meaningful conversation during the car ride home, but that proves to be the full extent of their reach – if we head off to sleep this evening hoping to change overnight, and to have a good night's sleep while doing it – we can all be certain that next year will feel an awful lot like this year, when we return to the oddity of so many “nonreligious” people immersing themselves in a full-day religious swim.

But if we resolve... right now... to reach into the wellspring of our tradition to take on the curriculum of our lives, perhaps we can write a different story in this new year 5775. We here at the temple want to help you do that. Sprinkled throughout this new year, we will be offering a series of Mussar Shabbat evenings, when our Friday night study will follow the service, instead of being embedded in it – and the study will be Mussar. We'll bring you the texts, explore the *middot*, teach you the practices. Come pray and then study – or if praying is truly against your religion, just come study. And then, when our Congregational Retreat rolls around on April 24-26, we will welcome as our Scholar-in-Residence the Founder and Director of the Mussar Institute, Alan Morinis, whose books have been the centerpiece of my own learning about Mussar. Now, I'm not sure what your mental picture of the Founder and Director of the Mussar Institute is, but in reality, it ought to be someone who's a lot like you. He's smart – a Rhodes Scholar with a doctorate from Oxford who has published a handful of books. He is modern and ambitious – he worked successfully in a university job and later became the CEO of his own film production company. He cares about his loved ones – he's married over thirty years, with two wonderful and accomplished children, and a nice house in the nice part of town. And, like each one of us, he had significant parts of himself that he desperately hungered to change. And so he turned his heart and career toward the study and teaching of Mussar, and this spring, we'll have the opportunity to deepen our own self-work by learning with him.

With our Mussar Shabbat evenings and our weekend with Alan Morinis, our goal is to turn a thirty-minute sermon into a yearlong practice in personal growth for us all. Come be a part of it. And for those of you who are not members of our congregation – a special invitation. I hope you'll consider joining us this year and participating in this process all year long. I say that not as a temple membership initiative. I say it because deep down, you and I both know that buying a High Holy Days ticket and hoping that these days, by themselves, will do their magic is a pretty unrealistic proposition. This is what a congregational community is for – so that we can have each other as inspiration and support as we walk the road of becoming the people we dream of being. Mussar is our tradition's master class in the pursuit of that dream, and the class is meant to be taken together.

You see, there is one other reason why we all can't resist coming back here year after year, even if praying and God don't really speak to you. We come because these holy days are ultimately all about confronting our mortality – arguably the biggest topic of all, the one that ought to shape every meaningful decision we make about how to spend our fleeting time on this Earth. It's a topic from which almost every other corner of our life is designed to shield us. There has never been a time or a place in human history in which death was more hidden away from us. We have scientists hard at work, trying to figure out how to make us physically

immortal. We have a tradition that contains numerous teachings about how to handle the matter of our contact with dead bodies, but most of those teachings don't really pertain to us anymore, because we rarely see the dead in contemporary American life. But no matter how much we may look away, we all know that death is coming – and that's surely a part of why we're all here, laboring our way through a liturgy that places its hands around our faces and forces us to stare at the limitations of our physical existence.

The heroic scientist who developed the polio vaccine, Jonas Salk, taught that "our greatest responsibility is to be good ancestors." He's right. And isn't that really what these holy days are all about? Not deluding ourselves into thinking that "this" is enough to change us – but shaking us into seeing that even a long life is short, so that we might sense the urgency of using this whole new year, should we be blessed with it, to get serious about becoming good ancestors?

That is a great reason for being here. Let the work of this new year begin.