

Rabbi Rachel Timoner

“Good After All”

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I know a child who’s been diligently saving the weekly allowance he receives from his parents. Over the last three years, as his savings have grown he has enjoyed imagining what special prize he’ll buy. He likes to consider his options: should he get something smaller now, or wait and save up for something bigger and more exciting? Over time, with birthday gifts and his allowance together, he has saved ninety four dollars. The other day, the child and his mother were talking about some family friends whose dad was out of work, and they were discussing how the family had hit hard times. Hearing this, without hesitation, the child said, “I have ninety four dollars I can give them.”

It is fashionable in these times to denigrate our species. It is popular to bet against our future. Philosophers, activists, scientists and environmentalists discuss scenarios in which we will be to blame for our own demise. Will it be terrorists with nuclear weapons or environmental destruction caused by greed and short-sightedness? They say we are slow learners, too stuck in violence, selfishness, and greed to create a just, peaceful and sustainable world and survive.¹

According to Richard Dawkins’ 1970’s bestseller *The Selfish Gene*, humanity is innately and only selfish, because we are driven to propagate our own genes. We have no other concern than our individual genetic survival. If we help anyone, it will be those who share our DNA. The only reason we help people unrelated to us is because we expect help in return.

We’re here today in these ten days of repentance to look deeply at the ways we have failed to live up to our values, values that center on our responsibility to others. Were we kind, generous,

¹ There are books with titles like *The End of the World: the Science and Ethics of Human Extinction*. (John Leslie, 1996) And the *Left Behind* series, an evangelical collection about human sinfulness and the end of life as we know it, which has sold seventy five million copies in America.

compassionate, honest? Did we do our part to help those in need and to address injustice? In this process of accounting for our souls, or *cheshbon hanefesh*, we honestly examine our behavior, identify how we have harmed others, and act directly to repair the harm that we have done. We're called upon to look unflinchingly at the ways that we as individuals, as a community, and as a species, do wrong.

As we look deeply, we see that so often we do what is convenient instead of what we know to be right. We lie, we're loose with our words, we can be cruel. We see how quickly we become defensive, how slowly we take responsibility. We see that others are often less than we expected – less competent, less honest, less reliable, less loving. When we look at our species we see corruption, greed, and indifference to suffering. We see how quick we are to make enemies and rush to war; how slow we are to make peace. We see that we are capable of brutality.

But if we do not believe in our own capacity for goodness, if we do not believe in each other's capacity for goodness, what are we doing here? What is the point of this exercise if the changes we seek are beyond our genetic limitations or ingrained patterns, and we will simply fail again and again? Everything hinges on what we believe about humanity. If we are capable only of the baser human instincts, why bother trying to be kind, or generous, or compassionate, why take action for justice or peace or life on earth?

I am here today to tell you that, despite all of our flaws, I believe in people. I am a rabbi because I believe in us. And more importantly, Judaism believes in us. Judaism stands by humanity's potential for goodness. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik teaches that, "It is a cornerstone of Judaism that however great one's transgressions may be, they fail to penetrate to the innermost core of the soul. Always, and under all circumstances, there remains something pure, precious, and sacred in a man's soul." Judaism says that despite all of our shortcomings, human beings are worth it. We learn, we change, we choose. We strive for goodness and we often achieve it. Compassion and love and patience and courage and good – we are capable of all of these. Judaism teaches that we can turn to each other, reconcile with one another, and create justice and peace and harmony in our world. And it begins right here, with the work we are doing today.

But before we get to that, come with me to Tanzania's Gombe preserve, where Jane Goodall's revolutionary study of chimpanzees forever altered the very definition of humanity, as she found that our closest relatives are more like us than we imagine.

In her book, *Reason for Hope*, Goodall writes that growing up in England in the thirties and forties, she was deeply affected by the Holocaust. One of her questions as she studied chimpanzees was about the roots of evil in humanity. How old and deeply ingrained, she asked, was our propensity for aggression, violence, and dehumanizing sub-groups of our societies. If these qualities appear in chimpanzees, she reasoned, maybe they come from the primitive creatures that preceded both species millions of years ago.

Goodall generally found chimpanzees to be gentle, loving, intelligent, and quite like us. They reason and plan. They kiss, embrace, hold hands, pat one another on the back, swagger, punch, kick, pinch, play, chase, and tickle. They form long-term, affectionate bonds, and they help and care for each other. But she also witnessed brutal aggression among the chimps. Once an individual or group was set apart as “Other,” the tribe would attack and kill. At one point, a small group broke off from the community that Goodall was studying and moved south. In their decision to move away, the southern group became the Other. In one instance, a female from the southern tribe came too close to the border as a group of northern males was patrolling it. They climbed into the tree where she was feeding as her infant clung to her body. She made desperate attempts to appease the males, crouching low and making submissive grunts. When one male passed by, she reached out to touch him with a typical submissive gesture at which he jerked away. And then, a few minutes later, all of the males joined in a brutal gang attack. She and her infant both died. Over the course of four years, the entire tribe that moved south was annihilated.

But Goodall also saw that chimps would risk their own status and well-being for the sake of other chimps. One example was Spindle, a twelve year old male who adopted little Mel, a chimp that had been orphaned at age three. Although they were not related, Spindle took Mel on as his own child. He waited for Mel during travel; he allowed the infant to ride on his back, and when Mel was frightened, he even allowed Mel to cling beneath him, as a mother carries her baby.

“Our aggressive tendencies are deeply embedded in our primate heritage,” Goodall says, “Yet so too are our caring and altruistic ones.”

In addition, Goodall found that chimps developed sophisticated methods of peacebuilding, in which they could intervene in aggression, preventing violence. In one story, a female chimp was expert at defusing tension among combatants. She would groom each aggressor, moving back

and forth between them, slowly drawing them closer to one another until they were calmed from the grooming and close enough to reach each other. Then she would remove herself and allow the two to groom one another and make peace.

Goodall observes: “Just as it appears that our wicked deeds can be far, far worse than the aggressive behavior of chimpanzees... so too our acts of altruism and self-sacrifice often involve greater heroism than those performed by apes. Surely, if chimpanzees can control their aggressive tendencies, and diffuse the situation when things get out of hand, so can we. And herein, perhaps, [is] the hope for our future: we really do have the ability to override our genetic heritage. Our brains are sufficiently sophisticated; it’s only a question of whether or not we *want* to control our instincts.”² Here we are, the human ape, ...with two opposing tendencies inherited from our ancient past pulling us now toward violence, now toward compassion and love.”

We are not slaves to selfish genes. We have the ability to choose. This is precisely what Judaism teaches.

In Genesis, humanity is created *b'tselem Elohim*, in the image of our Creator, the source of the universe and the source of life, with a *neshamah*, a pure soul. We say in the morning prayers, “My God, the soul you have placed within me is pure. *Elohai neshamah she natata bi tehorah hi.*” Our tradition teaches that no matter what we do, what harm we enact in the world, our soul remains pure. There is no such thing in Judaism as being sinful or evil at our core.

We have, running through us, the creative force of the universe-- called in Hebrew *yetzer*. We can use this creative force for good or for bad. *Yester hara*, the impulse for bad, is strong. But more than really being bad, *yetzer hara* is the impulse to take care of ourselves first, what Dawkins called “the selfish gene.” The Midrash teaches that without *yetzer hara*, no person would build a house, marry, beget children, or plant a vineyard.³ We need *yetzer hara*. But when expressed in excess, *yetzer hara* is the source of all evil that we do. All of the “me first” impulses we have – greed, violence, arrogance, self-centeredness, lying and cheating for image-maintenance or self-advancement.

² Goodall, p. 145

³ Genesis Rabbah 9:7

But *yetzer hara* is not the end of the story. We also have *yetzer hatov*, the impulse for good – to go beyond the self, to reach out when we see another in pain, to care, to give, to say I’m sorry. Goodall found in chimps what evolutionary biologists have now agreed to be true of humans. Evolution is not only physical, but also cultural, even moral. Because we have the ability to see the harm that we do, and to judge it, we as individuals, as cultures, and as a species, have the ability to change our behavior more rapidly than our genes will change. This is called moral evolution.

Teshuva is the Jewish contribution to moral evolution. Faced with the impulses given to us by our genetic heritage, we often make the right choice. It’s not publicized, it rarely makes the history books, but we show that we are good and loving and generous and patient and courageous many times every day. We work hard to overcome aggression and selfishness. And we also, too often, make the wrong choice. But when we do, we have the ability to turn, to change, to transform our behavior and ourselves to reach toward goodness. That is teshuvah, and expressed collectively over time, that is moral evolution.

The first and most difficult step in doing teshuvah is accepting responsibility. We try to make ourselves look better than we really are. We imagine that if we can hide our flaws from the sight of others, it’s as though they don’t exist. We’re invested in the image we project, sweeping out of sight the ways that we fall short. We don’t want to face the disillusionment that would follow from confronting the fact that we’re not as perfect as we think others expect us to be.⁴ But when we acknowledge our shortcomings, when we take responsibility for them, a new vista opens. As Adin Steinsalz, a contemporary Israeli Talmud scholar says, “you should regard [your] faults as something constructive, like the beginning of a new and beautiful story.”

Teshuva literally means returning. As Dr. Louis Newman writes in his book, *Repentance*, “We ask ourselves, ‘How can I turn myself, literally reorient my life, so as to maximize my own potential for goodness?’” As Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook describes it, “The primary role of *teshuvah*, ...is to return to oneself, to the root of one’s soul. Then [you] will ... return to God, to the Soul of all souls... It is only through the great truth of returning to oneself that the person and

⁴ Dr. Louis Newman, *Repentance*

the people, the world and all the worlds, the whole of existence, will return to their Creator, to be illumined by the light of life.”⁵

God knows that we are not perfect. Throughout the Torah, God is disappointed with humanity, but God returns to us again and again. Before the flood, God sees the violence and corruption that characterizes human behavior, and it grieves God’s heart; God regrets ever having creating us. (Gen 6:6-7) However, after the flood, God no longer holds an illusion that humanity will be perfect, but decides that we are worth it anyway, worth committing to forever. The God of Torah is frustrated with the Israelites, disappointed by their repeated failures and limitations. But God never gives up on the people. God sees us with all of our flaws and believes in us, knows that we can choose life, that we can change, that we can do better.

Sometimes it appears that our rate of change is slow. But if we step back to see our progress from the perspective of evolution, it is breathtaking. It was billions of years from the first living specks of protoplasm until the mammals appeared. Homo sapiens has existed for only a couple of million years. Our cultural and moral evolution in that time is astonishing. 2,500 years ago, one Greek city state considered members of another Greek city state to be subhuman.⁶ Less than two hundred years ago, slavery was an accepted form of labor. Increasingly human beings are reaching out to help each other across the borders of their own nations. The UN reports that there are more than 40,000 international non-governmental organizations. The more interrelated and interdependent we are, the greater the speed of moral evolution. Our sense of ourselves in relation to a global community and our understanding of the earth as an ecosystem has never been clearer. When other-interest becomes enlightened self-interest, that is moral evolution.

In the United States alone there are more than one and half million non-profit organizations. Millions of people wake up each morning and dedicate themselves to solving the problems of our world. Rarely do we know their names or their stories. We hear about the villains, but how often do we hear about all of the ordinary people whose job it is to get resources to the poor, or raise consciousness, or facilitate inter-group dialogue?

Americans give roughly \$300 billion a year to charity. One quarter of the population engages in volunteer work. And that’s not even counting all of the independent, spontaneous personal acts

⁵ In Newman, p. 125

⁶ Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal*

of kindness that people do. We all know people who hand out sandwiches on the street, or take care of a neighbor or raise money for someone on the other side of the world. We all know kids who are willing to give away their savings to help someone in need. How can that be explained by the Selfish Gene?

One of the great gifts of being a lesbian or gay person in these times is to have personally witnessed the human capacity for dramatic and rapid change. When I came out as a lesbian just twenty years ago, we were still pariahs in most places, we were “queers,” we were the quintessential “other.” When I ran a peer hotline for gay and lesbian youth, we were facing the highest suicide rate of any group in the country. I remember a sixteen year old boy whose classmates in an Indiana public school used their books to beat him unconscious, with their teacher present. It was commonplace for kids to get kicked out of their homes, beaten, or locked up in psychiatric facilities. When I came out it was legal in 48 states to openly discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. Now almost half of the states have made it illegal. When Felicia and I met and fell in love 18 years ago, it was inconceivable that we would ever be able to legally marry. But two years ago we were able, and we did. People of all walks of life are opening their hearts and choosing to love the stranger. They meet someone who is gay, and realize that the frightening Other is one of us. That’s cultural evolution.

So do not tell me that human beings cannot change quickly, that societies cannot change quickly. Do not tell me that we’re too entrenched in our patterns of hatred and violence – that we will always create scapegoats and enemies. Do not tell me that we’re not smart enough or sensitive enough to transform ourselves within a generation. We’ve all seen that we can.

Human beings rise or fall to expectations. If we believe that we are bad, we will limit ourselves. If instead we find that pure soul within ourselves and others, it will shine through us until we glow. We are here on this earth for such a short time, we must let the good within us come out. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav taught: “You have to judge every person generously... Look inside yourself. All you need to find is the smallest bit: a dot of goodness. By judging yourself that way, Showing yourself that that is who you are, You can change your whole life. And bring yourself to teshuvah.” (Likutei Mohoran 282)

So what do we do today? We can start by believing in our capacity for good, by finding our own “dots of goodness.” We can muster the courage to face our shortcomings, and we can

commit ourselves to change. The change might not be evident this week, or even this year, but if we return to it again and again, we will see the change.

Meanwhile, let's show ourselves and everyone else that people are worth believing in. Set aside a day or a weekend to improve one small corner of our country or help a person in need. In January, on Martin Luther King weekend, Leo Baeck Temple is returning to Mississippi to continue to rebuild those neighborhoods destroyed by Katrina. If you can manage the cost, be there. Let's prove that we still remember and we still care.

Last but not least, believe in someone else. Make personal peace with an estranged friend or member of your family, or with someone who has become an enemy. Turn toward them, find the dot of goodness in them, and give them another chance.

One of my favorite poems in *Mishkan Tefilah*, the Reform movement's new prayerbook reads,

The good in us will win,
Over all the wickedness, over all the wrongs we have done.
We will look back at the pages of written history, and be amazed,
And then we will laugh and sing,
And the good that is in us, children in their cradles, will have won.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us affirm that humanity is worth saving and that we will save ourselves. For we are not only selfish, violent, and short-sighted. We are also generous, peaceful, wise, and heroic. We have pure and shining souls, and we have running through us the creative force of the universe. If we give ourselves to teshuvah, we can, like the little boy with 94 dollars, strive to do good.