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“Unjumbled Turning”

In the Information Age, the rabbi makes an excellent electronic pen pal. I’ve spoken about this from this bima before. The advent of email was a game changer in many professions; the rabbinate is certainly one of them. For in addition to the many business and pastoral messages that I receive each day from so many of you, there is the wealth of other messages that come in. I would separate them into three categories.

Category 1: Comedy. By now, pretty much everyone here knows that I like a good joke – which is presumably why so many of you do whatever you can to satisfy that hunger of mine as frequently as possible. Results, I must confess, are mixed. But every now and then, something truly hilarious will come in... and then I’ll receive it from about a dozen more people. So just in case the video for the “i-Shiva” app reaches you in the coming days, worry not – I’ve seen it.

Category 2: Politics. The good news – I rarely have to mine the best papers or news sites for op-eds, because the most compelling ones on both sides of pretty much every controversial subject usually find their way to me. The bad news – replying seems always to be a losing proposition. If I don’t agree and choose to say so, heaven help me. If I do agree and choose to say so, I am asked why Leo Baeck Temple hasn’t independently corrected this massive societal ill.

That’s one of many reasons why I generally prefer Category 3, which I’ll call “The Search for Meaning.” From time to time, one of you will read something that really hits you in a deep place, and I love that you choose to tell me about that. And when more than a few of you choose to tell me about the same hit in the same deep place, I consider myself very fortunate, because I have learned something about where you are... where we are on our shared journey as striving human beings.

This past spring, quite a number of you were hit in the same deep place by David Brooks’ new book, *The Road to Character*. In it, Brooks distinguishes between what he calls “résumé virtues” and “eulogy virtues.” Résumé virtues are the traits that enable a person to succeed in the world of competition – grit, persistence, aggressiveness. Eulogy virtues are what make up the content of our souls, and they’re the things people talk about at a person’s funeral. Was she kind? Was she honest? Was she loving? Was she generous?

Brooks’ premise is that we all say we care most about the eulogy traits – that’s why we talk about them in eulogies. But we devote much more of our attention to developing the résumé traits, and of course, so do our schools, our self-help manuals, and our employers. Now, there’s nothing wrong with learning the résumé

traits – we need them in order to realize our ambitions. They make it possible for us to create and build and achieve. But it's the eulogy traits that form our character and reside at the heart of our inner life... and without the balance of a developed inner life, we may find great professional or financial success, but we will lack serenity. We will lack self-love and the selfless love of others. We will lack a guiding sense of right and wrong. And into that void will arise what Brooks calls "a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. You grade yourself on a forgiving curve. You follow your desires wherever they take you, and you approve of yourself so long as you are not obviously hurting anyone else. You figure that if the people around you seem to like you, you must be good enough. In the process you end up slowly turning yourself into something a little less impressive than you had originally hoped. A humiliating gap opens up between your actual self and your desired self."

Now, is that not the rationale for the invention of Yom Kippur – a day when we attempt to get serious about closing that humiliating gap between our actual selves and our desired selves? Tonight, we sit here uncomfortably, squirming around in the truth about who we are and aren't. The problem is that, for the most part, tomorrow night, we sit with a bagel in our hands, vaguely proud of ourselves for having upheld the long Jewish tradition of rigorous self-exploration... for a day. And then we return to the rush of days, carrying with us our sincerity about growing in the ways we will admit to ourselves tonight and tomorrow, but lacking any real game plan for making it happen. And if we're really being honest, we might as well confess that we're basically okay with having no real game plan. That's the annual routine.

And there's a reason why. We have conspired to create a society in which maturing into the people of character we long to be is simply not valued. Moral mediocrity is the product of our collective choices. We choose speed and efficiency, because they overwhelm and ultimately suppress the impulse to embrace the slower intentions that grow the inner life. The faster we move, the more constant our motion is, the less opportunity we will have to be truly alone with ourselves or with others – which is when our relationships with ourselves and with others can truly blossom.

So we get aggravated just waiting for a webpage to boot up when it's taking a few seconds to load. And we keep pushing the "door close" button on the elevator with increasing irritation. We like being really fast and really busy, and we've developed technologies that both reflect and incite that inclination. That is to say, I'm not sure if our smartphones can get any smarter than they already are, but one thing is for certain – every time you take yours out when you are sitting at a table eating with someone else, you are announcing to that person or persons that something else is more important to you than they are. Of course, when we do that to our families or closest friends, we tell ourselves that's not what we mean. We just grade ourselves on that forgiving curve once again.

Moving fast keeps the inner discourse about character on the surface. There just isn't much time to pay attention to those pesky eulogy traits when life is so intensely filled with the résumé traits. And this isn't just what we choose for ourselves. We've actually chosen it even more fully for our kids, who live much more heavily programmed lives than we grownups did when we were young, and who rely upon technology even more than we do to portray themselves precisely as they wish to be seen by others... which seems to be much more important to them and to us than actually becoming the people we wish to be.

Brooks, in his book, says this plainly: “Social networking technology,” he writes, “allows us to spend our time engaged in a hypercompetitive struggle for attention, for victories in the currency of ‘likes.’ People are given more occasions to be self-promoters, to embrace the characteristics of celebrity, to manage their own image, to Snapchat out their selfies in ways that they hope will impress and please the world. This technology creates a culture in which people turn into little brand managers, using Facebook, Twitter, text messages, and Instagram to create a falsely upbeat, slightly overexuberant, external self that can be famous first in a small sphere and then, with luck, in a large one. The manager of this self measures success by the flow of responses it gets.”

Now, I’m not here to impugn Facebook or Instagram. They’re not our problem. We’re our problem. We invented these technologies, and we decide every day how to use them. And if Brooks is right, and if Rabbi Berney was right on Rosh Hashanah eve, we are appropriating these new tools to make ourselves sadder... to immerse ourselves even more deeply in the competitive game of placing outer appearance, marketplace success, and the approval of others above inner appearance, soul success, and the approval of ourselves when we look piercingly within. The result is a surrendering to weak character – a slow decay of the very values we say we want to be about.

This may seem harsh to you. But there’s a whole lot of empirical data behind Brooks’ argument – data that sound pretty accurate when you hear them.

“In 1966, only about 19 percent of high school students graduated with an A or A–average. By 2013, 53 percent of students graduated with that average, according to UCLA surveys of incoming college freshmen. Young people are surrounded by so much praise that they develop sky-high aspirations for themselves. According to an Ernst & Young survey, 65 percent of college students expect to become millionaires.”

So it’s no wonder so many of today’s college graduates are so depressed – their sense of self is quantified by the million. We taught them to see themselves that way, no matter how much we knew all along that two-thirds of them are never going to become millionaires. But still we pushed them to build their résumés, schlepped them to endless lessons and rehearsals, and calibrated our approval based upon their grades and test scores. Can we be surprised if we taught them to be shallow pursuers of achievement, willing to do just about anything to win? Do we think they don’t feel the pressure that comes with our puffed-out chests when they get into universities we want to tell everyone about – and our latent shame... even disdain... when they don’t? Do they believe that our “unconditional love” is truly unconditional?

The data lay bare who we’ve raised: “In 1966, 80 percent of (college) freshmen said that they were strongly motivated to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. Today, less than half of them say that. In 1966, 42 percent said that becoming rich was an important life goal. By 1990, 74 percent agreed with that statement. Financial security, once seen as a middling value, is now tied as students’ top goal.”

We can’t really be about everything... to be about everything is to be about nothing. So if we’ve modeled for our kids to be about wealth and surface victory, what have we not modeled for them?

“Decades ago, people typically told pollsters that they had four or five close friends, people to whom they

could tell everything. Now the common answer is two or three, and the number of people with no confidants has doubled. 35 percent of older adults report being chronically lonely, up from 20 percent a decade ago.”

“Today’s college students score 40 percent lower than their predecessors in the 1970s in their ability to understand what another person is feeling. The biggest drop came in the years after 2000.”

“Usage of words like ‘character,’ ‘conscience,’ and ‘virtue’ all declined over the course of the twentieth century. Usage of the word ‘bravery’ has declined by 66 percent over the course of the twentieth century. ‘Gratitude’ is down 49 percent. ‘Humbleness’ is down 52 percent and ‘kindness’ is down 56 percent.”

Who can blame us for wanting to keep racing through the blur of life? It can be pretty painful to stop and look at what we’ve become.

We all do it. I remember my “Come to Moses” moment. I was a young rabbi whose résumé looked perfect. It was right after my final High Holy Days as Associate Rabbi at Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York. It was the “hot job” coming out of seminary, and I had just converted it into the invitation to become Senior Rabbi at Leo Baeck Temple. A proud moment, to be sure. I was a dad of two young sons, almost five and almost two. And of *course*, I was a regular reader of The New Yorker.

That fall, The New Yorker ran a story written by a young dad like me whose three-year-old daughter Olivia had an imaginary friend named Charlie Ravioli. Cute, I thought. He described Olivia’s play with Charlie: “She holds her toy cell phone up to her ear... ‘Ravioli? It’s Olivia... it’s Olivia. Come and play? O.K. Call me. Bye.’ (She) shakes her head. ‘I always get his machine,’ she says. Or she will say, ‘I spoke to Ravioli today.’ ‘Did you have fun?’ my wife and I ask. ‘No. He was busy working.’”

Once, Olivia bumped into Ravioli in a coffee shop, but he had to run. Another time, Olivia bumped into Ravioli, but he was working, so they jumped into a taxi together. Another time, Olivia said, “He canceled lunch. Again.”

Olivia was three years old... just old enough to have watched her parents very closely and develop an imaginary friend who was always too busy to play with her. And deep in my heart, in a place where I really couldn’t hide, I was left to ask myself: To what extent, on my ascent to my perfect job, had I become my sons’ Charlie Ravioli?

Tonight, we sit here uncomfortably. Tomorrow night, we’ll sit with a bagel... and without any real game plan. You see, it’s no coincidence that we commonly mistranslate the Hebrew word for this day’s purpose – *teshuvah*. The familiar English rendering of the word is “repentance.” The actual meaning of the word, as we’ve discussed here many times over the years, is “turning.” So *teshuvah* is not about confessing our sins – a challenging but straightforward act that actually can be accomplished on this one single day. No, *teshuvah* is about turning from our sins – revolutionizing ourselves to build lives of character... the lives we want. And for that, one day isn’t even close to enough to get the job done.

Does our Jewish tradition have a game plan for us? You better believe it. It's not even that hard to decode. Take the word *teshuvah* – jumble the Hebrew letters around a bit – and you've got *hashabbat*... the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the game plan. The Sabbath is how we Jews unjumble ourselves so we can actually turn – into the people of character we yearn to be.

It's not a very original idea, I know. But given how fundamental the notion of regularly pausing from the race through life is to our religious heritage, it's actually rather surprising how easily most of us have cast aside the jewel of Shabbat in our lives. I mean, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" is Commandment #4 of the Big Ten, right before "Honor thy father and mother" and "Thou shalt not murder." Clearly, our Torah and its greatest teachers over the centuries hold that Shabbat is as foundational a component of meaningful living as is refraining from murder or adultery or theft. And make no mistake – for the overwhelming majority of those sages, the obsession with Shabbat was not in whether you turned on or off the lights, or whether you used the stove. Shabbat was important because it possessed the power to change your life.

Tomorrow morning's Haftarah reading – the prophetic call of Isaiah to make this day's fast a charge to social justice – concludes with words we rarely focus on, but should: "If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath... I will cause you to ride upon the high places of the Earth."

The poet Chaim Nachman Bialik wrote: "The Sabbath is a day... of mental scrutiny and of balance. Without it the workdays are insipid."

Our temple's namesake, Rabbi Leo Baeck, taught that Shabbat is when "the soul... creates itself again and catches its breath of life."

The great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel asked rhetorically, "Is there any institution that holds out a greater hope for human progress than the Sabbath?"

So if ever you got the impression that Shabbat was about how many prohibitions you could observe or how many prayers you could offer, you were led astray. No, Shabbat is about shutting out the flying frenzy of our daily lives so that the resume traits can make a little room for the eulogy traits. Shabbat is about choosing a little less forgiving curve on which to grade yourself every now and then. Shabbat is about reaching a little higher than moral mediocrity. Shabbat is about turning... really turning, not just repenting.

Jews who want to do more than pay lip service about their desire to be people of character get serious about Shabbat. What does that mean? Well, for one thing, they notice that Shabbat is actually a day, not a dinner. Traditionally, Shabbat is a twenty-five hour proposition... a little more than a day, because you don't rush through it, and you don't rush out of it. So a touch more than one day out of every seven has to be devoted in some meaningful way to the eulogy traits. Renew your relationships. Tell someone that you too often take for granted that you love them. Meditate. Exercise. Journal. Pray. Play. Praise. Thank. Apologize. Forgive. Give. This will require you to treat Saturday differently than you treat Wednesday. It will also require you to treat Saturday differently than you treat Sunday. It can't be the day that gets filled with nothing but errands. Choose at least one thing that you won't do on Shabbat so that there is room for the eulogy traits to grow in

you – otherwise, you will continue to waste the institution that holds out the greatest hope for *your* human progress.

Here at Leo Baeck, we want to help you do this – and we’re going to help first by no longer being a part of the synagogue world’s great misinformation campaign about Shabbat. You see, a few months ago, I asked our clergy and senior staff to talk about the experiences that make Shabbat precious and impactful to them. And while each one of us mentioned services as a part of the equation, none of us mentioned services as the most important part of the equation. “So why,” I asked them, “does our temple offer nothing but services on Shabbat?” The answer, of course, was because that’s what synagogues generally do. And we looked at each other and said, “Why? Why do we have to stick with that convention? Why can’t we offer our congregants a broader, more diverse experience of Shabbat, if our wish is to inculcate a broader, more diverse experience of Shabbat in their lives?”

That is our plan. This is our temple bulletin calendar from September and October. On the Friday nights and Saturdays, every single listing is a worship service – as it is at almost every other congregation. It’s Shabbat services in the evenings... Tot Shabbat, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and Minyan in the mornings. And it’s fortunate that we offer so many prayer services, since we know that all of you enjoy coming to multiple services each and every Shabbat.

This is the last Leo Baeck Temple monthly calendar that will look like this. Starting in November, and growing gradually throughout this new year, we will be embarking on our “25 Hours” initiative at LBT. The goal will be to have our temple calendar look a little more like Shabbat is supposed to look. That means that there will still be plenty of prayer services – but there won’t be only prayer services. And sometimes there *won’t* be prayer services so that we can walk you through other doorways into the experience of Shabbat. Some of those doorways will open on Friday nights. Some will open on Saturday mornings. Some will open on Saturday afternoons. And don’t be surprised when some of them happen on a hiking trail... or on a bicycle... or on a yoga mat... or in a study group... or at a park... or a restaurant... or a neighbor’s home. Sometimes we’ll invite you here on a Friday night *not* to pray. And sometimes we’ll invite you to pray as we’ve not prayed before. For instance, early in 2016, we will introduce a brand new monthly Shabbat evening service featuring some of LA’s finest professional musicians... amazing music, interspersed with teachings and prompts to help us grow our inner lives, instead of a sermon. It will be shorter than most services you’ve attended – shorter and, we hope, mightier – and it will be designed to be nourishing for people of every age, from our youngest preschoolers to our wisest elders.

It will all be a grand experiment – which means some parts of it will work better than others, and we’ll learn a lot along the way. What we hope you’ll learn is to conduct your own experiment into what Shabbat can be... must be... in order for your soul to grow – in order for you to reclaim the language of character, to use the words and to embody them, so that you can learn to be a person you like better, the person they’ll talk about someday in *your* eulogy.

Because, like it or not, there will be a eulogy for each of us. We hope and pray that it won’t be for a long time, but none of us, old or young, knows for sure when it’s coming. We know only that it’s coming. And the indescribable honor I receive as a rabbi is that I get to sit with so many people as they are about to greet death.

I get to hear your stories, your wishes, your regrets. And if you want to know what I've learned most from these encounters, it's that we humans aren't thinking about how rich we are, or how mighty we are, or of what university our kid got into when we prepare to die. We're thinking about whether we loved and were loved. We're thinking about the relatively small circle of people who will truly miss us greatly when we're gone. We're thinking about what we stood for, what we really taught by our example. We're thinking about what we savored in life... what counted. We're thinking about the truths in ourselves that can bring us enough serenity to let go.

The gates to another new year have sprung open for us. It's not too late for us to think about these things before we're about to die – and to change the outcomes of who we become. It's right there for us. But we need a game plan. We have one. Unjumble your *teshuvah* with *hashabbat* – and turn... into the person you yearn to be.