

THE ROAD TO CHARACTER
KOL NIDREI 5777
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I think that most of you know the Dr. Seuss book, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* Published in 1990, it is the 5th-biggest bestseller on the *New York Times* list. It's about a little boy who is reminded of his many talents and encouraged to pursue what he wants in his life. "You have brains in your head," the book says. "You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself in any direction you choose.... You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go."

As the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks points out in a recent book, *The Road to Character*, the word "you" is repeated 90 times in this Dr. Seuss short story. And this is, according to Brooks, one of the major problems in our culture – the over emphasis on the self. Brooks calls it "the Big Me." As he explains, "...we have seen a broad shift from a culture of humility to the culture of what you might call the Big Me, from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe."¹

Think of all the messages our culture gives us, starting with Time Magazine's decision a few years ago to make the Person of the Year on its cover a mirror – in other words, each and every one of us. Think of how much parents, grandparents, our schools and the movies tell our children how special and wonderful they are, just for being themselves, without any need to earn the praise. Think about Yahoo's advertising campaign stating: "Now the Internet has a personality –It's You!" Or Earthlink's slogan which was "Earthlink revolves around you." Selfies anyone?

Think about the major theme of commencement speeches "larded with the same clichés," says Brooks. Themes like: "Follow your passion. Don't accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are great." This is the gospel of self-trust."² We have come to a point where we look inside ourselves to determine the answers

¹ P. 6.

²² P. 7.

to our questions about life. We make decisions based on whether or not something feels good. Outside facts are no longer all that relevant, and neither are other people's opinions, except for those we agree with. We have an awfully hard time getting out of our own heads so we can actually contemplate a different reality -- someone else's.

At his commencement speech to Kenyon College a few years ago, the writer David Foster Wallace tells this story:

"There are these two guys sitting together in a bar in the remote Alaskan wilderness. One of the guys is religious, the other is an atheist... The two are arguing about the existence of God with that special intensity that comes after about the fourth beer. And the atheist says: 'Look, it's not like I don't have actual reasons for not believing in God. It's not like I haven't ever experimented with the whole God and prayer thing. Just last month I got caught away from the camp in that terrible blizzard... I was totally lost and I couldn't see a thing, and it was fifty below, and so I tried it: I fell to my knees in the snow and cried out "Oh, God, if there is a God, I'm lost in this blizzard, and I'm gonna die if you don't help me.'" And now, in the bar, the religious guy looks at the atheist all puzzled. 'Well then you must believe now,' he says, 'After all, here you are, alive.' The atheist just rolls his eyes. 'No, man, all that was was a couple Eskimos who happened to... wander by and showed me the way back to camp.'"

The atheist is so certain of his own internal reality that new facts will not change his beliefs. And the same is true of the believer.

The facts are interpreted to conform to his faith.

All facts point to the veracity of each one's pre-existing certainty.

As Foster Wallace explains:

"...everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it's so socially repulsive. But it's pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth.

Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of.

The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor.

And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real... [C]ollege is about teaching you how to think...

What that... really... mean[s] is: To be just a little less arrogant.

To have just a little critical awareness about myself and my certainties.

Because a huge percentage of the stuff that I tend to be

automatically certain of is, it turns out, totally wrong and deluded. I have learned this the hard way, as I predict you graduates will, too.”

A Chassidic dictum could help us to balance out this outsized pride and lack of humility. It tells us to keep two pieces of paper in our pockets.

On one, it should say: “The whole world was built just for me.”

On the other, it should say: “I am but dust and ashes.”

That would be incredibly counter-cultural, as would the whole emphasis in Judaism on the importance of community.

Unfortunately, the reality is that we are becoming more and more self-centered and selfish, as indicated by recent surveys.

“...psychologists asked 10,000 adolescents whether they considered themselves to be a very important person. [Between 1948 and 1954,] 12 percent said yes...in 1989...[the numbers shifted to] 80 percent of boys and 77 percent of girls.”³

David Brooks points out that, “Over the past few decades there has been a sharp rise in the usage of individualistic words and phrases like ‘self’ and ‘personalized,’ ‘I come first’ and “I can do it myself,’ and a sharp decline in community words like ‘community,’ ‘share,’ ‘united,’ and ‘common good.’ The use of words having to do with economics and business has increased, while the language of morality and character building is in decline.”⁴

And the consequences are not pretty. As Brooks asserts, “This self-centeredness...leads to selfishness, the desire to use other people as means to get things for yourself. It also leads to pride, the desire to see yourself as superior to everybody else. It leads to a capacity to ignore and rationalize your own imperfections and inflate your virtues.”⁵

It also means we are less empathetic, less intimate and less trusting of others.

A University of Michigan study found that ‘today’s college students score 40 percent lower than their predecessors in the 1970’s in their ability to understand what another person is feeling.’⁶

We also measure ourselves much more by external achievements rather than by internal moral character development.

On Yom Kippur, we read the Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus. We are enjoined to be holy because God is holy.

What does it mean to be holy? Our great Talmudic sage, Rabbi Akiva, says that the whole Torah can be summarized as:

“What is hateful to you, do not do to any other.” That is Akiva’s take on the central mitzvah of the Holiness Code which is:

³ P. 6.

⁴ P. 258.

⁵ P. 10.

⁶ Pp. 257-8

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Are we losing the capacity to love someone else as much as ourselves?

David Brooks’ antidote to the egotism of our age is very much in line with Jewish tradition. He suggests that to be holy, we need to build our moral character. We need to recognize that it takes hard, internal work to develop into the good people we would like to be. That means having the humility to recognize that there is a larger world than the one revolving around us. It means being ruthlessly honest with ourselves as we struggle to overcome our flaws. In other words, it is the work of teshuvah in which we are engaged at this very time. To accomplish this, David Brooks outlines a Humility Code which consists of the following steps:

1. “We don’t live for happiness, we live for holiness... Life is essentially a moral drama, not a hedonistic one.
2. The long road to character begins with an accurate understanding of our nature, and the core of that understanding is that we are flawed creatures.
3. We do sin, but we also have the capacity to recognize sin, to feel ashamed of sin, and to overcome sin... There is something heroic about a person in struggle with herself...
4. In the struggle against your own weakness, humility is the greatest virtue... Humility reminds you that you are not the center of the universe, but you serve a larger order.
5. Pride is the central vice... [T]he struggle against sin... is the central drama of life... This struggle against, say, selfishness or prejudice or insecurity gives meaning and shape to life... The purpose of the struggle against sin and weakness is not to “win,” because that is not possible; it is to get better at waging it.
6. Character is built in the course of your inner confrontation.
7. No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own. Individual will, reason, compassion, and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed and self-deception. Everybody needs redemptive assistance from outside—from God, family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, and exemplars.
8. Defeating weakness often means quieting the self... Only by quieting the self can you be open to the external sources of strengths you will need.”⁷

But there is something more, another dimension we need to draw from. Because in Judaism, contemplation, introspection, remorse, are all well and good, but we are required to do something

⁷ Pp. 262-4

with our newfound awareness. A mitzvah is an action resulting from a clear moral understanding.

But for answers about what to do,

“don’t ask: What do I want from life? Ask a different set of questions such as: What does life want from me?

What are my circumstances calling me to do?

In this scheme we don’t create our lives; we are summoned by life...

“Our job is to figure certain things out: What does this environment need in order to be made whole?...What tasks are lying around waiting to be performed?”⁸

In the Garden of Eden, God asked Adam and Eve:

“Where are you?” As Jews we are meant to answer that question with “Hineni.” “Here I am, ready to serve. What is my mission?”

We are meant to repair the world, not simply to bask in it.

In the 1960’s, President John F. Kennedy declared:

“Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” By the same token, we are not here to ask God to do for us, but to figure out what God demands of us.

Put another way, the late Rabbi Harold Shulweis tells us:

To the question "Does God exist?," I answer "Do you exist?"

To the question "Is God good?," I answer "Are you good?"

To the question "Is God compassionate?," I answer "Are you merciful?" To the question "Does God intervene?" I answer "Do you intervene?"

To the question "Does God really care?" I answer "Do you really care?" The reality of God is proven behaviorally, not theoretically.

I authenticate God not with my lips but with my limbs.

For the Torah, holiness cuts across all categories of our existence.

The Laws of Holiness in Leviticus include ritual, business ethics, behavior toward the poor and disadvantaged, and family relations.

Every moment in our lives offers us the possibility of being holy.

We do this by going beyond our own selfish desires and appetites, recognizing the divinity in the other and seeking out the broken places in the world that need repair. That is how we can achieve the highest purpose of our humanity, how we can be the most Godlike, and how we can reach the level of the angels.

⁸ P. 21.