

YOM KIPPUR
5769

One lesson we learned from our father was the importance of being able to laugh at yourself. What lessons have you learned? Lessons that you would consider truly important: life lessons that help you live your life meaningfully. From whom did you learn these lessons or from what experiences? What life lessons do you think others have learned from you and what lessons would you like to pass down? What lessons do you wish you had learned earlier?

I would like to share with you lessons of life that I find to be important personally and rabbinically. I believe with all my heart that human beings are able and intended to learn and grow. We are able to evolve and become more aware, conscious, sensitive and compassionate people. We are free not to but we are not free to avoid the consequences when we do not.

We cannot be afraid to change whether it is to be open to a different tune for Adon Olam or a different way to understand a particular issue. We must have confidence that we can look at issues and problems openly and honestly. We are free to dig in our heels, plug up our ears and close our eyes but this is no way to live. And if we are not busy living, we're busy dying.

Conservative Judaism is predicated upon our ongoing effort to merge tradition and modernity in context of time and place thereby requiring of us to grow, change and look at issues differently. This is true whether we are dealing with questions of men and women sitting together, driving to shul on Shabbat and holidays, the full participation of women in services, homosexuality or whatever may be next. We must not be afraid of meaningful change.

Common sense—that is not as common as it should be—tells us that we should not ignore facts and arguments to avoid changing our positions and views. How many of us have the same prejudices, biases and attitudes that we had years ago? So many seem to live by the axiom that we should never let the facts influence our opinions.

Recently, I mentioned to a congregant how important I think being self-critical is. Being self-critical is not being self-demeaning or, having low self-esteem. To the contrary, being self-critical, holding the mirror up to ourselves, requires a great deal of confidence and strength. Each of us needs to be self-critical and collectively as Americans and Jews, we need to do the same.

Judaism is essentially altruistic. This means that we are here to serve others and we are here to be part of something much bigger than ourselves. Remember that we are the last to be created in the Torah story of creation and we are at the same time the crown of creation, just a bit below the angels. I know that it is possible to be a holy sinner and to be one hell of an angel. I also know that there are so-called religious people who are not

holy and some folks who believe literally in angels and hell who behave like the devil and create so much hell in this world.

Regarding Jewish observance, G-d is not obsessive-compulsive, human beings are. G-d cares about how people, animals and the environment are treated more than about a particular lesion or bump in a cow's lung. Glatt kosher can be glatt treif. G-d does not want any person to abuse or exploit another and G-d does not want thousands of women to suffer because their husbands will not give them divorces. The fact that so many rabbis will do nothing about these and other offenses—all in the name of G-d—is a defamation of G-d's name.

I know that the Holocaust was not punishment for Reform and Conservative Judaism beginning in Germany in the 19th century and tragedies do not happen to families because a mezuzah on their home was not kosher. Religious fundamentalism is religious fundamentalism be it Christian, Muslim or Jewish. It must not be defended, romanticized and certainly not supported.

No one should worship and be faithful to a god who would run a world that way. No one should worship a god who, as is recorded in parts of our Torah, wants us to execute Shabbat violators, homosexuals or entire populations because they worshipped differently. We should not worship a god who we fear will punish us but we should worship G-d who wants us to live moral/ethical lives, a G-d we love and because we are thankful for our G-d given lives. Our Torah and Talmud are full of such commandments and teachings.

There are many who live in Israel but oppose the democratic secular state of Israel. They do not recognize or observe Yom HaShaoh, Yom HaZikaron or Yom HaAtzmaut. We should not support any Jewish organization that does not recognize and support the State of Israel. We also should not support any Jewish organization that does not cooperate with and participate as true partners in the larger Jewish community. My colleagues and I, regardless of our significant differences, can sit at the same table and put aside these differences to work on behalf of the Jewish community. We are able to do this because we do not take the position that our Judaism is right and other denominations are wrong. As much as I disagree with Orthodoxy, I do not maintain that those who practice it are practicing inauthentic Judaism and I do not reject the authority of their rabbis.

Professor Edward Wilson of Harvard who outrages religionists of all sides because of his positions on free will and theology is nevertheless embraced by fundamentalist Baptists and others, acknowledging that they disagree with his positions on abortion but agree with his positions on taking care of creation. Liberal religionists, feminists and people of color disagree with his positions on genetic predisposition but agree with his position on environmentalism. We need to find the commonalities that bring us together and put what we disagree on aside so that we can work for the well-being and future of our world.

I know that it is alright to doubt and question; indeed, it is a prerequisite for authentic and truthful living. Answering questions as to why terrible things happen to good people with the empty and disturbing response that it is G-d's will is not helpful or enlightening. One can be a deeply religious person and be a skeptic. One can be a person who doubts and argues with G-d and still be a deeply religious person. Religious observance does not define being religious. I know and believe that for Jews, however, one's heart and soul can be cultivated and refined through religious observance when we understand and practice in ways so that our observance helps us become more ethical and moral individuals. Shabbat, kashrut, prayer, study, tzedakah and so much more can, if presented and approached correctly, lead to an elevation of our spiritual, ethical and moral character.

Being religious means that we live our lives knowing why we are here. We need to take care of ourselves and those dear to us and at the same time be concerned with and take care of others. Life is not an either-or construction. We need to be engaged participants in our community and we need to engage those who are not as our recent and extraordinarily important community study indicates so clearly.

I have learned that in synagogue life there are customers and congregants and you cannot be both at the same time. Customers make demands, threats and take whereas congregants ask, question and give. Sarah McLachlin sings: "The more we take the less we become." Our rabbis teach that a cow wants to give milk more than her calf wants to drink it. That is how we should be. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us that the meaningfulness of life lies not in what we take but in what we give. Are we teaching our children this?

There is an ongoing tension between being an individual and being part of a community, between enjoying our freedom and being responsible, between being practical and being idealistic, between being self-critical and self-affirming. I know that many Jews have remarkably important insights and moments of awareness during the High Holy Days. I know for most of us these moments do not last. We must understand that because they do not last does not mean they are not real at the moment; we must understand that we can make them last longer and produce real results if we dedicate ourselves to extending their life span. The fact that we have not yet done so does not mean we cannot do so now. Family, friendships and community are priceless and precious. Any investment in our relationships to strengthen them or improve them is considered holy work, "avodah kedoshah." Some of our best moments of reflection and resolve during the High Holy days are when we realize and accept what we need to do in the year ahead vis-à-vis our relationships.

We are created to be historical creatures. Know beyond any doubt that we put footprints on our world and we put fingerprints on our children. We need to know that life and other people are not always just and fair but we can strive to be more just and fair than we are. Jews, who know suffering more than any other people, cannot ever stand by suffering and injustice. We must always get involved—be it in Over the Rhine or in Darfur, be it in the rape of our rain forests or in the trafficking of children and women, in

fighting anti-Semitism and racism of any kind. We are all implicated in the repair of the world, we are responsible and we will be held accountable.

Rabbi Sacks teaches that most people confuse what is urgent and what is important. We use our time and energy to pursue what is urgently of interest to us, what we urgently desire and want, what we urgently are willing to invest our lives in but what is not truly important. Do you remember Reb Zusya's question as to why people do not want what they truly need and do not need what they so passionately want?

Rabbi Haninanh ben Hama was right when he taught that G-d controls everything about us when we are born except one thing: how righteous we will be—that is up to us. We can blame others or circumstances all we want but ultimately the buck stops with us. Rabbi Tarfon was right when he taught that though we are not responsible to complete the task, we are not free to desist from it. We are to do our best; that is all G-d expects. G-d actually has more faith in us than we have in ourselves. I know that Judaism has no place for cynicism or hopelessness; Judaism also tells us never to give up on our deepest ideals—not for ourselves or for our world. Judaism tells us not to pretend that everything is fine, the world is alright, the Messianic Era has arrived. Judaism, fully in the face of reality, tells us there is work to be done, we can contribute significantly and we are never to give up. We are to begin anew everyday; everyday is another chance for us.

I know that that what we call day-to-day living is not day-to-day living. There is no such thing. There is no moment that repeats itself and there is no day that we ever have a chance to return to and do again. We are never to kill time—never to kill time. We are here only to live time. We should do our best to live as if we will live forever and to live each day as if it is our last. The author, Jhumpa Lahiri, writes how bewildered she is by every mile she has traveled, each meal she has eaten, each person she has known, each room she has slept in and that as ordinary as it appears it is all beyond her imagination.

Amy Bloom the novelist writes: “People who say time is money are wrong. Time is better than money, and I want as much as I can possibly have. A few years ago, I never thought about time at all. When a very dear friend was coming to the end of her life, she decided to help me out of the indecisive, puzzled, puzzling spot I was in about marriage, about work, about most everything. ‘Look, darling,’ she said, tapping her watch. ‘From age 50 to 80 it’s not minutes—it’s seconds. Pay attention.’ I must not have looked as if I was paying enough attention, because she put her hand on my wrist and squeezed. ‘It’s seconds. You think you know, but you don’t.’” Bloom says she is beginning to know.” Are we?

On Yom Kippur, before Yizkor, we are especially to learn the lesson that all of us are created in the image of G-d and every one of us has an opportunity to make a contribution to the future of the Jewish people, humanity and our world just as all of those we are about to remember had. We are all part of the human heritage; we are all putting footprints and fingerprints on the future of the world, on each other and on our children. Let us remember to be able to laugh at ourselves but never to laugh at our

responsibility, at our potential or at all the opportunities we have to learn why we were born and why we are here. Let us remember this as we remember our loved ones.

YIZKOR