

## Courage and Fortitude

The time is yesteryear. A circus comes to town. The circus people are preparing for the show on the outskirts when one of the tents catches on fire. A clown, the only one of the circus people dressed, runs to the center of the town asking the locals to bring buckets of water to put out the fire.

Unfortunately the townspeople knowing that clowns are supposed to act that way, knowing that clowns are not serious, ignore the message until they see the smoke from the burning tent.

Finally. Here we are. The *shofar* has been sounded. The melody of *Kol Nidre* lingers in our hearts and souls. *Aseret yamim nora'im*, the ten days of awe since Rosh Hashanah are past. It is Yom Kippur. It is our day of reckoning.

Has it been a show, a serious circus of sorts? Or, have we taken heed?

How do we know if we've repented enough? How do we know atonement has filled the void left by regret and guilt?

The great rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, cautions us not to knock timidly at the distant gates to determine if God is listening.

Going further, Maimonides suggests we should think of ourselves and the world as perfectly balanced: exactly half guilty and half innocent.

If from this day forward, we commit one sin we press down the scale of guilt against ourselves and the entire world and cause its destruction.

And if we perform one good deed we press down the scale of merit and bring salvation to the entire world. Our simplest acts become infused with profound meaning.

The Torah portion this morning said it all:

<sup>12</sup> *It is not in the heavens, that we should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?"*

<sup>13</sup> *Neither is it beyond the sea, that we should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?"*

<sup>14</sup> *No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.*

The proof of our inner-work this High Holy Day season, the proof of our *teshuvah*, the proof of our return to the principles and values we deem important, does not emerge until we leave this sacred and profound space and behave differently outside, out there, in the real world.

It is said that the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, once refused to enter a well-respected house of prayer. He said the house was full to the brim of teaching and prayer.

Not surprisingly, his students didn't understand. That a house of worship should be filled with teaching and prayer, sounded like a compliment.

The problem, explained the Baal Shem Tov, is that *during the day the people here speak words. But their words have no wings. Their words remain stuck between the walls, squatting on the floor, growing layer by layer like decaying leaves until the decay has packed the house to overflowing and there is no longer room for me in there.*

The proof of our *teshuvah* does not emerge until we leave this sacred and profound space and behave differently outside, out there, in the real world.

Again this morning's Torah reading speaks to us:

<sup>19</sup> *I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day:*

*I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse.*

*Choose life* <sup>20</sup> *by loving what is right and true and behaving accordingly with fortitude.*

Behaving accordingly with fortitude. Let's not undervalue the meaning of this instruction to behave accordingly and with fortitude.

All too often we are the townspeople who didn't believe the clown was serious when he sought help putting out a real fire. All too often we enjoy the act of philosophizing and don't really take the values that are at stake to heart.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his book, God in Search of Man:

*The spirit of philosophy has often been characterized as the quest of values, as a search for that which is of greatest value.*

*But what is the spirit of the Bible? The Torah?*

*Its concern is not with the abstract concept of disembodied values, detached from concrete existence. **Its** concern is with man and his relation to the will of God. The bible is the quest for the righteous man, for a righteous people.*

In an interview with Carl Stern a couple weeks before his death, Heschel shared his message to young people; he said:

*Let them be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments...above all, let them remember...build a life as if it were a work of art.*

The truth of the matter is that ultimately we are responsible for what we say and what we do. The truth of the matter is that our habits are **not** beyond our control.

In the Midrash there is a story about a king whose son believes he is a chicken. The prince squats on the floor naked. He clucks and only eats chicken feed. His father, the king exhausts all the resources of the region to cure his son, but nothing works...until a wise rabbi enters the kingdom.

The prince insists he is a chicken, and the rabbi chooses not to argue. Instead the rabbi challenges the prince to continue to be a chicken but to dress like a human being. He can be a chicken all he wants, if he'll just wear a princely robe while he asserts himself as a chicken.

Furthermore, the rabbi assures the prince he can choose to be a chicken who eats human food at a table with a knife and fork. And so on, the rabbi convinces the king's son to behave like a prince in every way, despite thinking of himself as a chicken.

In a Ted Talk, (and if you don't know what a Ted Talk is, please look it up on the internet or ask someone to help you), Amy Cuddy, a social psychologist, scientifically demonstrates that our body language has the potential not only to reveal how we are feeling but to proactively shape who we are.

In her study, she discovered that when a person sustains a body posture that is open and confident for two full minutes, measurable hormonal changes take place. Testosterone levels increase. Cortisol levels decrease. Testosterone is associated with a sense of power; and cortisol relates to the stress we are experiencing in a given moment.

Increased power and diminished stress simulate the confidence we need to do better for ourselves and for others.

Regular practice positively affects the choices we make in life. In her presentation, Cuddy recalls the idiom, "Fake it until you make it."

And, over time, good choices build within us confidence, trust, and even happiness. Cuddy calls this, "Fake it until you become it."

We have, during this and every Yom Kippur, cried out:

*Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu...*

*We are guilty and we have betrayed our values; we have been cruel...*

And we recite, *al chet...*

*For this sin and for that one we are sorry...*

Still, the essence of the Day of Atonement is not to dwell on the mistakes but to move forward. What is most important is what happens from this moment forward.

Will we obligate ourselves to kind speech and right conduct? Will we be diligent? Will we will we be consistent, even when it is neither convenient nor popular?

Paraphrasing Heschel, again, in God in Search of Man:

*We, Jews, are trained to be more mitzvah-conscious than sin-conscious.*

*While salvation is the central concept in Christian piety, mitzvah is the focus of Jewish religious consciousness...*

*Mitzvah refers not only to a commandment,*

*but also the sense of obligation we bear*

*and the actual performance of that commandment...*

*Mitzvot range from acts performed by the high priest in the Temple to the most humble gesture of kindness to one's fellow man; and from acts of external performance to internal attitudes about others and ourselves.*

Every act done in agreement with what is right and true is a *mitzvah*...

It's what we do that matters.

Heschel continues:

*To the pious man, a deed is an encounter of the human and the holy, of man's will and God's world. Both are hewn from the same rock and destined to be parts of one great mosaic...*

*The world is torn by conflicts, by folly, by hatred.*

**Our** task is to cleanse, to illumine, to repair.

*Every deed is either a clash against or an aide in the effort of redemption...*

*What is the motive behind Jewish living? It is, perhaps, the yearning to establish an accord of the self and what is right and true;*

*a traveling through a wasteland toward the only flower on the distant peak.*

*It is as if I were the only man on the planet and God, too, were alone waiting for me.*

Each of us, alone, is called to action.

Before us are good choices and bad choices; the challenge is to choose life and not death, to choose building up and not tearing down, to choose replenishing and not depleting...

We are never finished so long as we speak and act. Every word and every deed is a choice. **We** are in control. **We** are responsible.

Accordingly, Rabbi Judah Ben Tema taught in Pirkei Avot:

*Be bold as the leopard, swift as the eagle, fleet as the deer, mighty as the lion to perform what is right and true.*

*It is not in the heavens...neither is it beyond the sea...*

*The matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart.*