

## **ROSH HASHANA DAY 1--THE DOERS**

Pirke Avot 3:17 Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah would say: "When a person's good deeds exceed his wisdom, to what may that person be compared? To a tree with few branches but with many roots, for even if all the winds of the world come and blow against it, it cannot be moved from its place."

The High Holidays call for an honest cheshbon hanefesh, an accounting of the soul, and if I am going to be perfectly honest, I am a person who thrives more on talking than doing. Yes, I volunteer, yes I get things done, yes as part of my job I help people all the time, or at least try to, but if I am going to be honest with myself and with you, alas, I must admit that I am oftentimes more a man of words than a man of action.

So when I come to know people who are more action than talk I am usually in awe. More on that in a moment. As most of you know and as I mentioned last night, each year I link all my High Holiday sermons to a common theme. Last year the theme was the power of words. This year it is the lessons I have learned from my elders, specifically those elders in this community who have passed away. I feel like I simply have to share some of their stories with you, our congregation. I owe it to them and the lives they led, and I also owe it to you, because these were incredible people who were nothing short of inspirational to all who knew them. I am going to focus specifically on the lessons and values they taught while they walked this earth, which in Judaism are called Middot. Middot are slightly different than mitzvot, because mitzvot are commandments, and therefore obligatory, whereas Middot are values that people choose to live by. For our purposes over these holidays, I am going to group them into four general categories that I am calling the doers, the lovers, the givers, and the teachers.

Today I want to focus on the doers, on the value of actions, of deeds, of the Sid's and Shirley's, the Pinky's and Pola's, Ethel, Ruth, Annie, Dave, and Eileen. These were incredible people, all of them, and I could have placed any of them in the lovers or teachers or givers categories just as easily, but I am honoring these individuals tonight specifically because I knew them best for what they "did" rather than what they said or gave or led.

Before I get to the stories about the doers and some actions we ought to be taking, I want to say a few words about this specific Middah or Jewish value called Melacha, which I am going to translate as doing. Melacha actually means work. For instance, the 39 things you are not allowed to do on Shabbat, according to the Mishna, are called the 39 "Malachot," 39 physical work actions like lighting a fire, threshing, winnowing, cooking, or carrying. But if we are more familiar with it as a "thou shalt not," the "thou shalt" part of melacha is at least equally important.

Consider Rabbi Elazar's statement I opened with about good deeds exceeding wisdom being like a tree with the strongest roots, where all the winds in the world cannot blow it down. How about Genesis 2, where God places us in the Garden of Eden for the very purpose of working it, "tilling and tending it." There is Proverbs 6, where we are told to learn about the value of work, of doing, from the ultimate worker, the ant. "Study its ways and learn," it says. "Without officers, leaders, or rulers, it lays up its stores during the summer and gathers its food at the harvest." Even versus learning, work is to be praised. Midrash Tanhuma points out that if

a person learns but two paragraphs of Torah in the morning and two in the evening and is occupied with work the rest of the day, it is as if he or she has fulfilled the entire Torah.

But the value of melacha is not really about labor. It's really about actions that help others. It's made explicit in today's Haftarah, where Hannah takes action by confronting the Priest and making a vow which leads to the birth of a son, Samuel, who will eventually save the Jewish people. It is epitomized by Talmud Shabbat 127, where it says elu devarim, these are the things, the fruit of which we reap rewards in both this world and the next: "honoring father and mother, deeds of lovingkindness, rising early to go to the house of study, welcoming guests, visiting the sick, attending the bride, accompanying the dead, meditating on prayer, bringing peace between human beings, and Talmud Torah k'neged kulam," the study of Torah is equal to them all." It's a 4<sup>th</sup> Century 10 Commandments, or rather, 10 middot, 10 values expressed as actions, which are so important that they are recited at the beginning of every morning service (not by us, mind you, we skip it because no one is here to hear them), but still, their value and importance are paramount.

Well, these are just a few of the actions undertaken so regularly by some of the doers of blessed memory s of our congregation, and it is my honor to tell you about a few of them. If I missed one of your favorites, or worse, your relative, well, I still have three more sermons to come, and if I still missed them, please forgive me. When you honor people by name you always run the risk of forgetting someone. Let me know after the holidays, and perhaps I can honor them with a separate teaching.

There was Pola Silver, Mother of our member Alan Silver, who for 36 years worked for the Sunshine Biscuit Company, makers of Hydrox Cookies, among other products. If you wanted something done, you called on Pola. She regularly lifted 50 lb. bags of flour and even lost a finger at work. That sounds awful, but she was proud of it. It was nothing compared to surviving the Holocaust, she reminded me. She brought that same energy and ethic to Temple Beth Abraham. If you needed a mailing done or Bingo called at the Reutlinger Center, you called Pola. She not only did it efficiently, but she did it while feeding all the other volunteers streudel. That is the middah of melacha, hard work or action, and also gemilut chasadim, deeds of lovingkindness.

There was her good friend Shirley Dorfman, who did a lot of the mailings with Pola. She also helped run the kitchen for 3 decades. I remember her telling us during a training session how it was in our kitchen that she made her best friends for life, and it brought us all to tears. I also remember another woman, older than Shirley, named Sylvia Karsh, who really wanted to have me and my family over for dinner. She was of the generation where it was an honor to have the rabbi for dinner, but her age and health left her in no position to cook. Shirley went over there to "help," and, I suspect, prepared the entire meal herself while giving Sylvia the credit. She was such a natural born leader and hard worker that she was nominated to be the first female president of this congregation back in the seventies. Unfortunately, her husband was very sick at the time and alas, that honor fell to Jo Budman, who fortunately, is still young and healthy. Shirley lived the value of melacha, hard work and action.

There was the beautiful Reba Schechtman, who was a lifelong volunteer, for Hadassah, B'nai B'rith, WTBA, even the Men's Club, which she insisted on joining separately. Even in her last years, most of which were homebound, she insisted on making phone calls, reminding every member about their upcoming yahrtzeit as well as informing the kids who had attended

18 services or more that they were going to get a prize. I remember her excitement when sharing the story of one little girl who heard she had earned a prize for attending 18 services and shouted “I won, I won” throughout her house. Shirley reflected the value of melacha, hard work and action, through everything she did.

Another great woman who was all about hachnasat orchim, welcoming guests, was, in many ways, a guest here herself. Unlike the others I have mentioned, who were here for decades, Eileen Moore didn’t move here until she was in her 70’s, but she immediately joined the education committee and eventually the Board and Executive Committees. She also played poker with the boys. She didn’t wait around for people to welcome her—she dove in and welcomed others. She also volunteered her time at St. Vincent de Paul’s soup kitchen each Sunday, along with several others, including Annie Strom Schwartz.

I will never forget Annie, who kept strictly Kosher, yelling across the room as she dished out the main course, “more ham, I need more ham.” Annie always spoke her mind, and loudly, sometimes with curse words she learned running a bar in South Carolina, but mostly she used her words to help others and express gratitude for being able to make it to shul for another week, where she was always one of the first few to arrive. Annie was a walking example of the middah of melacha, hard work and action.

There was the glamorous Shirley Perl, who starred in the movies as a chorus girl with Marilyn Monroe, and wore the longest eyelashes I have ever seen until the day she died. If you wanted a speaker for an event, it didn’t matter how important, she would manage to get them here, from Jerry Brown to Wendy Tokuda to Joyce Goldstein. I don’t know if it was mafia sounding voice, her incredible persistence, or just some sort of magic, but she always delivered. She also snapped pictures of just about every event we ever had in the days before our phones were also cameras.

There was Ruth Kline, who was all about the middah of hashkamat Beit Hamidrash, rising early to go to the house of study, as she attended morning minyan, Saturday morning services, and Torah study every single week. She was also the subject of what came to be known as the “Ruth Kline” test, which was for Bar/Bat Mitzvah students. She would often come up to me after services and say “Rabbi, I didn’t understand a word they said.” If she didn’t come up to me after the service and say that, you passed the test. And, of course, minyanaires can always hear her voice saying “page?”

There was Dave Siver, who along with his buddy Jack Coulter, did all the lighting and electrical work in this congregation gratis. From indoor to outdoor, from floor to ceiling. When I say ceiling, look above you. They crawled up from the roof and were responsible for wiring and changing the lightbulbs that are above your heads, way above your heads. And these two men did it all without any expectation of being recognized, let alone for personal glory.

Perhaps the epitome of melacha, hard work or action, was expressed through the midah of bikkur cholim, visiting the sick, and specifically by the “Sunshine Boys” who made this value a huge part of their lives, Pinky Pencovic and Sid Shaeffer. Pinky passed away just this past year, and he was probably the greatest volunteer this synagogue has ever had. After retiring from the jewelry business, and having already served as Past President of the Men’s Club, the Endowment Board, and the congregation itself, Pinky did everything there was to do at TBA. He arranged the honors for the High Holidays. He volunteered in the office along with his wife Agnes, at least twice a week, and sometimes every day. He and Agnes sent out all the Yahrtzeit

notices, kept the files, and painstakingly turned on and off every single memorial light every single week in this sanctuary. He was also very quick with both his compliments and his kisses. You might go in for a handshake, but he insisted on that big kiss.

And his partner in crime was Sid Shaffer, also a Past President, minyanaire extraordinaire, producer of shows for gala affairs, fundraiser, caretaker of rabbis (in fact the new rabbinic intern we have this year is officially called the “Sid and Ethel Shaffer Rabbinic Intern” because he loved mentoring all of us), calligrapher of Bar Mitzvah certificates, co-creator of one of the first comic strips in the country to feature black and white children together, WeePals with Morrie Turner, and so much more. He wrote why he did all this in an Omer article: “I’m still repaying the community because I don’t take anything for granted. When somebody does something for me, I try to do 10 times more for them to show how much I appreciate what they have done.” And I would be remiss without also mentioning his wife Ethel, who passed away this past year as well, who was the unofficial synagogue historian and was with him for every mitzvah and middah.

What a way to live. And none of these people that I have mentioned did any of this for the honor or the glory. They did it because they lived their lives according to these Jewish values. They used the value of melacha, of hard work, to impact this community, which was everything to them. Almost all their volunteer work was spent serving the Jewish community. It’s not that they didn’t care about the rest of the world—they did, but their primary concern was the Jewish people. They believed in the primacy of another middah—“kol Yisrael aravim zeh ba zeh,” that all Israel is responsible for one another.

We need to appreciate them, learn from them, emulate them. These middot must be our middot. These values must be our values, and we must do them, not just talk about them. Our community depends on it—on volunteers that run programs, that raise funds, that call people, that deliver meals to the sick, that give elderly rides to services, that run our Men’s Club and Women of TBA and serve on boards and committees, that look out for one another and help one another in every way possible. Without these volunteers, our congregation dies.

But “Kol Yisrael aravim zeh ba zeh,” that all Israel is responsible for one another, has a brother or sister, which is also a vital necessity. That brother or sister’s name is “Tikkun Olam,” which literally means repairing the world, but has come to mean social justice and utilizing our Jewish values to help others beyond the Jewish community. And there is no doubt that one of the great issues of the day that needs our work ethic, our energy, and our values is the issue of immigration. One cannot help but look at some of those images of families being torn apart, people being detained or separated indefinitely without due process and be reminded of the pain of our own history. I say this as one who believes every nation has the right to determine its immigration policies and police its borders. But it’s impossible not to wonder if more borders had been opened to refugees in the 1930’s and 40’s if hundreds of thousands of our people might have been saved. Some of our members have stepped forward to help already, with rides, with gift cards, even with volunteering to house some of the people. Talk about living your values, not standing idly by while blood is shed and remembering that we ourselves were once strangers. Thank you for what you are doing.

I began with the words of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah who said: “When a person’s good deeds exceed his wisdom, to what may that person be compared? To a tree with few branches

but with many roots, for even if all the winds of the world come and blow against it, it cannot be moved from its place.”

May we bring the value of doing to our community to strengthen the roots of our tree to make it so strong that no wind can knock it down, no worm can destroy its wood, no dryness can cause it to wither, and may our tree be strong enough to grow branches that reach out into the community and into the the world and welcome everyone to sit under our vines and fig trees, with no one to make them afraid.”