

Last Sermon – Arrogance and Humility

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By Rabbi Michael Z. Cahana

“Everyone has one sermon in them.” I was told, “Your job is to figure out what yours is.”

These were the words spoken to me and my class 35 years ago when I was a rabbinic student at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City. The charge was given to our cohort by our homiletics professor who taught “the art and science of preparing and delivering religious sermons” – or what might otherwise be called “Rabbinic Droning.” Giving sermons is a very important part of the rabbinic profession; both an art and a science, a skill and an intuition. If the primary role of the rabbi is to be a teacher – which the word “rabbi” means, then the sermon is one of our major avenues for education and, perhaps, inspiration.

So getting this message as a young student rabbi - that there is actually only one sermon in you and that the real task is to understand that sermon for yourself – that felt very daunting.

Now as I stand before you giving my last High Holiday sermon as Senior Rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel before my retirement this summer – I know that it is true. Yes, there are many subjects I have spoken about over the years. Some political, some about Israel, some about finding the depth of the Jewish soul. But those are topics. Subject matter. The pretext of the true message. “Everyone has one sermon in them. Your job is to figure out what yours is.” My sermon is one of balance.

But before I share it, I want to recognize one important truth: everyone has a sermon in them. Yes, those in my profession are given a special privilege to publicly address a community. But I believe that truly everyone has a sermon in them. You! Yes, you! You do as well. Your task is to figure out your message. And then to share it with others. Each one of us is a teacher.

One question I regularly ask when I am interviewing families after the death of a loved one, is: “what were the important values they taught you?” I usually ask this near the end of our conversation, after they have shared stories and memories. It is usually the hardest question to answer. What I hear is often beautiful themes, “love of family” and “kindness” for example. These are real, but do they reflect our core? We don’t often share our deepest beliefs and convictions, even with those we love. We doubt our ability to be a teacher of values to those we love. But you have a sermon in you. You have a belief that animates your life force. In your heart you know why you are on this earth and what you want to teach to those closest to you. You may not believe you have the right or the right words to express it. But everyone has a sermon in them. It’s your job to figure out yours.

I know my sermon, which I have given over the years - sometimes overtly and sometimes hidden in my words and actions. And I want to express it to you plainly this Yom Kippur as the message I want to leave you with. It is a message of arrogance, humility and gratitude.

The text for my life's sermon is based on a Hasidic tale¹:

The Hasidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peschischa² (פשיסכט) used to say to his students: "Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that he or she can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling low, discouraged, or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket and, there, find the words: 'For my sake was the world created³.' But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket and find the words: 'I am but dust and ashes.'⁴"

These two pocket texts, one from the Mishnah, one from Torah, represent two poles of being: arrogance and humility.

Our right pocket contains the phrase: בשבילי נברא העולם "The world was created just for me" – in the Mishnah this philosophical statement comes in a line of reasoning that recognizes that all humans are of infinite value and should be treated with infinite respect. But it is a very human trait to take that humanist value and flip it into arrogance. "All people are equal – but I am more equal than others," to misquote Orwell. Since I can only know my own mind and my own desires, it is reasonable that I place those as my highest value. Arrogance is, in many ways, the natural and unconsidered state of the human being. Yet the Hasidic master didn't take that as the highest good but instead as a salve for those moments in life we all have, when we are feeling discouraged, beaten, and inconsolable. בשבילי נברא העולם "For my sake was the world created" as a phrase to remind us, in our lowest moments, that we have value in G-d's eyes. An ennobling thought that should give us hope when all seems hopeless.

Our left pocket holds the biblical text from Genesis: וְאָנֹכִי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר – "I am but dust and ashes." This was the statement of humility Abraham gave as he argued with G-d to save the people of Sodom. "*I venture to speak to my Sovereign,*" he said "*I who am but dust and ashes.*" Here the Hasidic master suggests a text to read when we are feeling overconfident, too sure of ourselves, unable to listen to the advice of others. וְאָנֹכִי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר – "I am but dust and ashes." We human beings have a tendency to see ourselves with G-d-like powers. We build Babel sized buildings to touch Heaven and place no limits on ourselves or our capabilities. It is good, in those moments of arrogance, to be reminded of our own mortality and limits. One day we will be gone and we forget to ask ourselves about what is the most important use of our limited time. How will the world be better for our passing through? What lives will we touch and improve? Who will be grateful for our presence?

Together, these "two pockets" represent a human balance. Arrogance and Humility are not virtues or evils to themselves. They are both necessary for us to function in the world. Classic

¹ Popularized by Martin Buber in his book *Tales of the Hasidim* (NY: Schocken Books, 1947), p. 249

² Poland, c. 1765 – 4 September 1827

³ Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

⁴ Gen. 18:27

rabbinic texts translate these two qualities as the balance between what is known as the *יֵצֶר טוֹב* and the *יֵצֶר רָע* the inclination towards good and towards evil. The *יֵצֶר רָע* – the evil inclination is necessary, as the midrash says:

. . . were it not for the evil inclination, a person would never build a house, would never marry, would never have children, and would never engage in business.⁵

The Talmud also expresses this need for arrogance:

A Torah scholar who has arrogance should be excommunicated, and one who does not have arrogance at all, should be excommunicated as well.⁶

Arrogance is needed to hold a position or belief and to defend it. But untampered arrogance prevents one from understanding and considering another's position.

Humility – acknowledging that “I am but dust and ashes” - is a necessary counter to our tendency to be certain. We hold onto beliefs despite evidence to the contrary. We tend to tear others down before considering that they could be right. Humility allows us to listen to others. But while we honor the humble, too much humility is paralyzing. If I am only humble why would I expect anyone to listen to me or consider my views? The humble person cannot act even in the face of evil. The truth is, we need both arrogance and humility to be in balance in order to be fully human.

We were unaccustomed to this concept that arrogance and humility exist on a spectrum in part because Christian ethics tends to focus on the dualism of “good” and “evil” as absolutes. Good and evil are right and wrong and one must fully embrace one and not the other. But Jewish ethical traditions, such as the 19th Century practice of Musar, see human character traits, *middot*, as they are called, as a continuum. It is the extremes, such as Arrogance and Humility, which cause us to be out of balance. The human being who finds balance between the two finds peace. That person can act in the world with confidence yet also has the compassion to see the humanity in others.

There is, of course, a classic Star Trek episode⁷ which expresses this concept perfectly. Which is one of the reasons Star Trek is more Jewish than Superman.

The truth is, like Captain Kirk split into two halves, we need our opposite traits to be in balance. To draw on the strength of arrogance, but to temper it with humility.

This has been my sermon, the core example of my ethical beliefs and I have tried to teach it in many ways. We are often angry with ourselves, second-guessing and replaying in our heads what we have done and said wrong. We berate ourselves for speaking too confidently and shutting other people down. We chastise ourselves for not standing up for ourselves, or for

⁵ Bereshit Rabbah 9:7 – male oriented translation modified

⁶ TB Sotah 5a

⁷ TOS Season 1, episode 5 – “The Enemy Within”

others. We come up with the snappy comebacks we should have said, and we rehearse the arguments we will give next time. The Hasidic story of the two pockets is a reminder to be gentle with ourselves, to see that we sometimes lean too far in one direction or another, but not to demand of ourselves to be one way or another. In truth we seek balance.

I grew up in a family with a lot of arrogance. There was a certainty in the way my family members talked, and they argued loudly. They were a people of accomplishment, but as a child I found myself retreating into quiet corners and embracing humility. Perhaps I was just a classic middle child trying to keep everyone happy. I grew resentful of arrogance. But over time as an adult, I found that humility locked me away from myself and my own desires to accomplish. It took me a long time to learn not to berate the arrogance within me nor to lose myself in humility but to recognize that what I sought was a balancing of these two *middot*.

Maimonides wrote about this in the 12th century – the ideal of balance in our character traits. “This is the path of the wise,” he wrote “Every person whose traits are intermediate and equally balanced can be called wise.”⁸

We are constantly reaching for one pocket or the other. And knowing that both traits - arrogance and humility – are equally powerful and necessary. Together they help us find rootedness and strength and peace.

But there is one additional element to this concept of balance which has been my core sermon: and that is the virtue of gratitude. I believe gratitude is the tool which brings us to this balance. Gratitude lifts us out of ourselves and pulls us away from the poles of arrogance and humility. Gratitude is, I believe, the religious task – not just for Judaism but for all religious traditions. To stand in humility before the wonders of the world, to remind ourselves to stop and appreciate the beauty: in a mountain, in a sunset, in a child’s smile. To stop our constant quest for accomplishment and material gain and to simply say “Thank you” – even when we are not sure who we are thanking. To cultivate a grateful heart is to find a midpoint, a balance between Arrogance and Humility: To say “I did not create this world, but I am worthy of accepting it.”

This is the lesson of the High Holidays – and especially Yom Kippur. That we have the ability to grow and change. That we are not trapped by our mistakes but have a path of forgiveness. And particularly to forgive ourselves.

“Everyone has one sermon in them.” I was told “Your job is to figure out what yours is.” As I stand here today with the privilege of addressing you for the last time on the High Holidays as Senior Rabbi, I am grateful to you for allowing me to share my sermon with you over these past two decades. And I encourage you to find the sermon in your heart. To teach and to share what is meaningful and important to you – to share with those you love. To live with striving for balance in your soul – with confidence in your vision, in your experience and with the humility

⁸ Mishneh Torah, Human Dispositions 1:4

and compassion to listen to others. To live with gratitude in your heart for this beautiful and rich and remarkable world we have been given. Thus shall you be blessed.

May the Creator who filled us with the character traits we need, and a rich soul with the ability to choose our path in the world, help us to find the completely necessary attributes and their complementary opposite, and through gratitude help us to return to balance and peace.

Amen.