

Yom Kippur Morning
Saturday, September 30, 2017 / 10 Tishrei, 5778
Rabbi Deborah K. Bravo
Makom NY: A New Kind of Jewish Community

“Becoming our Best Selves – A New Model for Flourishing”

Recently, I attended a B’nai Mitzvah of twins. At the service, the mother was speaking to her children, giving them a charge, a blessing for life. She said to one of them: what I love most about you is that you help people to be the best they can be.

I loved that quote, and it stuck with me for the days afterward. What does it mean to be the best you can be? As a parent, I am constantly reminding my two children that they are very different personalities (any of you who know Sam and Sophie know this to be very true), with very different strengths, and so what I may ask of Sam is very different than what I will ask of Sophie, because their ‘best’ looks different. If Sophie is able to figure out a little something in the area of computer programming, she feels a great sense of success and accomplishment, because that is out of her comfort zone. If Sam were to figure out the same thing, it wouldn’t really mean anything to him, because he does that every day. And if Sam was able to say, make himself some eggs, he would feel a great accomplishment, because he typically stays far away from the kitchen, where as Sophie would need to bake a four-layer chocolate cake with ganache in the middle to feel a sense of accomplishment in the kitchen. They each have a ‘best’, but each one is different.

The landscape of our time is such that we are seeing a complete display of good and bad behaviors and actions on a daily basis. We are regularly exposed to the very best sides of human nature, and the very worst sides of it. In my Rosh Hashanah morning sermon, I referenced some of the worst sides of human nature. This morning, I would like to focus on the better sides of human behavior.

We need not look any further than current events to see some incredible and heroic behaviors. Look at the stories coming out of Texas and Florida since the hurricanes hit there several weeks ago. Look at the stories in Puerto Rico, despite the horrific conditions still in existence, of human beings doing what they can to help others, even when they have very little for themselves.

I have been following the FaceBook posts of my colleague in St. Thomas, where the synagogue and much of what was in it was nearly destroyed, as well as many people’s homes, but people have rallied and done good in the face of horror. People are finding ways to get food to this community, unofficially, because it is taking some time for official help. They even are hoping to have a visitor who will be there in time for Yom Kippur, today, and is expected to bring bagels, babka, whitefish and other New York delicacies for break-fast. All things we may take for granted, but not the folks in St. Thomas. Not this year. And someone was kind enough to go above and beyond in getting these items to them.

I’m sure many of us can think of actions we have seen, either personally or globally, that remind us that there is much good being done in the world. But that is not the question for this day. On THIS day, this Yom Kippur, we must ask ourselves – what is OUR better nature? How do we find it? What does our best look like?

I have come to love the CNN series that occurs each year about Heroes. It shows how every day people are finding ways to be their best self, and are able to help others at the same time. One man created an

organization that offers therapies, educational services and healthy meals to young people in Columbia living with a range of disabilities. Another woman works with refugees in Georgia, one woman is helping women in Nashville who are marginalized to have housing and therapies. And the list goes on and on. If you have never seen this series, it is worth watching.

These people are clearly figuring out how to be their best, however, these actions are quite grandiose, and perhaps feel a bit too ‘big’ for where to start. Perhaps we can start by thinking about a particular moment where we felt we were really being great. Not necessarily the moment when we got a job promotion and a raise, nor the moment where we got a great score on a test. Dig deeper. Perhaps it was the moment that no one else really knew about, but it stood out for you.

One of the many things I love about FaceBook is that I observe, typically from afar, some of these great moments. Often people post them just as a matter of – this is what I did today, and those are the moments I especially like. Whether it is a picture of a mother and daughter at a Call-Bank, reaching out to people to help them understand and take action about health care for all. Or it is a teacher sharing a sweet story about a student who just needed a certain embrace in that moment. Or the doctor who posts pictures with her staff having fun and enjoying what they do, because she gave them permission to have fun each and every day at work.

I actually keep a mental list when I hear a story or see something that I think shows people being their best at any moment. For me, these are the stories that counter-balance the many horrible stories we hear on the news about hatred, ignorance, apathy and greed. The story told by a wife about her husband, with no sense of bragging but just stating how he was helping a senior to pick up the pieces and get their lives back together after a loss. The Bar Mitzvah student who shares, innocently, how he tried to include a new student at school who seemed to be a bit lonely and left out. I believe many people have moments of being their best, whether consciously or sub-consciously, and it reminds me that good, ultimately, will outweigh evil in this world.

What I am suggesting today, however, is that each of us, very intentionally, should strive to be our best selves. Imagine what this world COULD look like if we were all to step up to the plate, in our actions, our words, our beliefs, and ultimately, in our legacy that we leave to the future generations.

We are all different individuals. We have different strengths, different characteristics, different abilities. How do we figure out what our best self looks like? How do we access where we need to grow, to change, to adapt? Many of you have heard me talk about the area of Positive Psychology that focuses on personal character strengths. We all have many, many strengths; we actually all have a taste of all the strengths that are out there, but some of them are what we call our signature strengths. This means, if we know what our signature strengths are, and we focus on them, and even enhance them, they are probably among the best ways we can do good in this world. Focusing on our own signature strengths gives us, perhaps, the best chance to be our best ME.



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There are 24 different character strengths, as defined by the VIA Institute on Character in Cincinnati. On your way out, this card with all the character strengths on it is available for each of you, as a way to contemplate further how each of us can be our better ME. These strengths are very much paralleled with many Jewish middot, or virtues, that exist through the study of Mussar. Mussar is a Jewish path of character development and spiritual growth leading to awareness, wisdom and transformation. Whether we are looking through the lens of positive psychology or Mussar, the question is clear – what can we do to flourish as a human being in today’s crazy world – how can we be our best, not only for those around us, not only for our God, but, most importantly, for ourselves?

When can I stop trying to be like others, and simply be what I am meant to be, what I am capable of being? If I want to be my best ME, I can’t worry about what others do well. I can only pay attention to ME. I know that on Long Island, in this community, this is not always easy. Sometimes we are jealous of those who seem to sail through life easily. Perhaps we struggle financially, and we watch jealously the people who seem to have it easy. Perhaps we struggle emotionally, maybe we are often depressed, and we watch jealously the people who seem to always be happy. Perhaps we struggle socially, and feel we do not fit in, and we watch jealously the people who are always surrounded by friends. First of all, we must always remind ourselves that what we see on the outside is not necessarily what actually IS on the inside. And second, just because someone appears to have it all, that does not mean they are flourishing as human beings.

‘Human flourishing’ is defined by the psychologists, as an effort to achieve self-actualization and fulfillment within the context of a larger community of individuals, each with the right to pursue his or her own such efforts. It encompasses the uniqueness, dignity, diversity, freedom, happiness, and holistic well-being of the individual within the larger family, community, and population. Achieving human flourishing is a life-long existential journey of hopes, achievements, regrets, losses, illness, suffering, and coping. I used to think that the role of the rabbi was to help people find ‘Jewish’, to live more meaningful Jewish lives. I now realize, with the help of some folks at CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, and the VIA Institute on Character, that my role as a rabbi should be to help individuals, families and a community to reclaim or develop new pathways toward human flourishing, with Judaism as the vehicle.

And it all needs to begin small, with each individual person, ready and willing to be the best ME I can be. How do we lean in to our better nature? It is right there before us – how do we embrace it, enhance

¹ Image above was displayed on the large t’fillah screen and was given out to each person on a card as they left the service.

it, share it with others? This year, I learned to strength-spot, which means, I have learned to see these character strengths in others, so that I might better understand them, and be able to find them in myself as well.

This morning, I would like to casually introduce you to a few of these character strengths, so that you might begin to think about how they may help you to lean in to your better self. If these character strengths are not your strengths, then figure out what your strengths are, and begin to think about how to embrace them, and incorporate them, into your daily life, into your every action. If you would like to know more about your character strength, there is a link for a quick survey on our website, that will give you a ranked list of character strengths. I have been using this survey with many individuals, couples and groups all year, and people are very intrigued with the outcome.

Since it is Yom Kippur, I want to begin with the strength of **Forgiveness**. In Hebrew we call it s'licha, and it is really the essence of Yom Kippur. In this context of character strengths, Forgiveness is defined as: forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful. For some of us, forgiveness is much easier. For others, we struggle with this every day.

For me, forgiveness is high on my list of strengths. I have the ability to easily move on, and not hold on to things. I have a dear friend for whom forgiveness is at the bottom of her list of strengths, and it is much more difficult for her to let go and move on. Neither is better; it just is what is; it makes us who we are. Because I am now keenly aware that forgiveness is one of my top strengths, I am intentionally leaning in to this strength. I am helping others for whom forgiveness does not come so naturally; I am more patient with others because I realize that forgiving people, letting go, is not so easy for them – it is simply not part of their DNA. There is no question that my awareness of this strength has allowed me to be better, to flourish in a deeper way.

Another character strength that I have focused on this year, both personally and within our community, is the strength of **Perspective**. Perspective is being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people. What does it mean to have perspective?

It means that when I get an email where someone is yelling at me, I have learned to take a deep breath, and to imagine their perspective on the situation, and to respond accordingly. It means that we are teaching in our Moadon, our school, with the perspective of our students at the top of our list. Of course our perspective is to teach them as much 'Jewish' as we can in the short time they are in our classrooms; but the perspective from the student is to have fun, and to instill an interest in them for Judaism and Jewish learning that they will want to continue to embrace Judaism for the rest of their lives. Perspective means that when I give a sermon that might feel political, I keep in mind the folks on the opposite side of the political scale from myself, and I write my sermon so that they might enjoy it as well. I know I am not always so great at looking at life from my own children's perspective, but that I am working on. If perspective is a strength for you, embrace it, enhance it, use it to do good, to be better in this world.

One last one – a character strength I am so intrigued by – **Appreciation of Awe and Beauty**. This means noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experiences. Perhaps you are someone who literally stops to smell the roses. Perhaps you pause to appreciate a person, an action, a bit of knowledge. For those of you for whom this is a strength, you can be a better self by sharing this with

others; by helping the rest of us to slow down, and take a deep breath, and appreciate that which surrounds us each and every day.

I believe that all of these strengths, and our awareness of them, can help each of us to flourish as human beings, and to become a better form of our selves.

I would like to share with you a wonderful Chassidic story about Reb Zusya, whom I referenced last night as well:

Once, the great Hassidic leader, Zusia, came to his followers. His eyes were red with tears, and his face was pale with fear.

"Zusia, what's the matter? You look frightened!"

"The other day, I had a vision. In it, I learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life."

The followers were puzzled. "Zusia, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?"

Zusia turned his gaze to heaven. "I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?'"

His followers persisted. "So, what will they ask you?"

"And I have learned," Zusia sighed, "that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the Promised Land?'"

One of his followers approached Zusia and placed his hands on Zusia's shoulders. Looking him in the eyes, the follower demanded, "But what will they ask you?"

"They will say to me, 'Zusia, there was only one thing that no power of heaven or earth could have prevented you from becoming.' They will say, 'Zusia, why weren't you the best Zusia you could be?'"

At Yizkor later today, I will be focusing on remembering loved ones by remembering who they were, not what they did. Should we not begin to do this for ourselves, while we are still here on earth, still alive to share our gifts with others. We recently concluded the year of mourning for our beloved local Nassau County Legislature Judy Jacobs. Judy had an incredible resume of action after action that she did throughout her life. Whenever I mention her name, people immediately have a smile, and often share a story about how Judy impacted them. But more important than these actions are the ways people remember WHO JUDY WAS. What a blessing that so many people remember Judy in this light, and I believe what a blessing that Judy was able to be that level of good, knowing her strengths, not just in death but truly in life.

Imagine if instead of writing a resume or a CV that lists all of our accomplishments and skills, that instead, at the top of the page, we highlighted our character strengths, and then we described what activities in our lives help to support and enhance those strengths of character. What would the top line of your resume read? Maybe a brave, loving, hopeful person. Or a prudent, spiritual, forgiving woman. Or even a team player with great leadership skills and a real zest for life.

Our task for today is actually quite simple. We need to answer two basic questions, that only we can answer: what does our best look like, and what are we going to do to make sure that we are being the best we can be?

Dear God,
Please give us the ability to look inward and find our character strengths,
The courage to embrace them,
And the desire to pursue them.
God, please help us to flourish as human beings,
So the craziness of our world might become a little less,
So the goodness in humankind can ultimately prevail.
May it be soon. Kein yehi ratzon.