

Yom Kippur Day
5778- 2017
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

Let's talk about feelings.

How many of you are feeling happy? I hope that these Services and what we do here will make you feel even happier – or if you are not feeling so happy, I hope that these Services at the very least, will make you feel less sad.

How many of you are feeling angry? I hope that what we do here will calm you down and make you feel more at peace with yourself and with the world.

How many of you are feeling generous? I hope what we do and say will make you feel even more generous – with your time and money – to support causes that will make the world a better place.

How many of you are feeling guilty? I hope what we do here today will make you feel even *more* guilty.

Wait a minute – that does not sound very nice. In all these other examples – the goal of Judaism was to help make us feel better – but when it comes to guilt – the goal of Judaism is to make us feel worse?

Yep. Guilt-R-Us. McDonald's does hamburgers, the Post Office does mail, and Judaism does guilt.

The rabbi is walking down the street in Manhattan and suddenly he notices the president of his shul sitting at a table, right by the window of a *treif* restaurant just about to dig in to a large lobster. The rabbi stops, crosses his arms, and stares at the man from the street as he slowly finishes his meal. Finally, the congregant pays his bill, gets up and walks out to greet his rabbi. He says, "You know rabbi, this is the first time I ever ate lobster under rabbinical supervision!" I have never stared down anyone eating anything. But, sometimes I do feel that just by my walking in the room – people start to feel guilty.

Someone once challenged me that they don't understand the difference between many of my congregants and many of the congregants at the Reform Temple, their observance patterns seem to be similar. "Yes," I acknowledged "many of my members do not keep kosher or Shabbat, they do not come to shul as often as they should – but, my members feel guilty about it!"

In Judaism guilt is not a four-letter word. (It is 5 letters – but it is not a dirty word either). We Jews believe, that the amount of guilt that one lives with is in direct proportion to the amount of responsibility you are willing to accept. And Judaism is all about responsibility – guilt is the collateral damage we willingly accept for taking responsibility.

People here of a certain age will all know who Alfred E. Neuman is. Of course, many of us remember Alfred E. Neuman as the somewhat clueless, always smiling and worrisome face that adorned the satirical Mad Magazine from 1956 on. I grew up with Alfred E. Neuman. (I

remember one day coming home and asking my mom where my collection of Mad Magazines had gone – I had boxed them all up and put them in the garage for safe keeping, I knew that someday they would be worth a fortune. “Oh, those old magazines, I threw them all out!” and thus ended my career as a collector) And those of us who knew and loved Alfred E. Neuman remember the three words that were always associated with him: “What me worry?”

Alfred E. Neuman worried about nothing and no one. He was carefree and unburdened by any responsibility. That was why we loved Alfred E. Neuman, because his carefree attitude was so different from the world of responsibility we were being inducted into. But, on the other hand – we knew that Mad Magazine was a satire – and that although its pose was one of carefree indifference – in fact it cared deeply about the issues of our day. Alfred E. Neuman was not intended as an example for anyone but was intended as a humorous model of irresponsible indifference.

At the other extreme from the Alfred E. Neuman's of the world – are the Charlie Brown's of the world. Charlie Brown is the beloved character from George Schultz's comic strip: Peanuts. Charlie Brown saw everything as his fault and everyone as his responsibility – “Oh Good Grief!” It was a heavy burden he carried around as Charlie Brown tried to navigate the world. If Alfred E. Neuman never worried - -poor Charlie Brown worried enough for all of us. If Alfred E. Neuman walked through life without a care, happily unaware of any sense of responsibility and duty – Charlie Brown carried the world on his shoulders and was rarely if ever happy. (Lucy to Charlie Brown – “If you stay depressed just two more days you will hold the world's record! “That's great!” replies Charlie Brown. “Well, you just blew it!” says Lucy.)

No one really wants to be Charlie Brown and no one really wants to be Alfred E. Neuman. Surely there must be some better models to emulate.

Enter Judaism. For the last 3500 years Judaism has been trying to provide us with models of how to walk in the world. Models of responsibility. From *Adam HaRishon* – to Abraham, from Yosef to Moshe, From Jeremiah and Isaiah and Amos to Jonah and Job, from Saadya Gaon to Moses Maimonides, from Theodor Herzl to Abraham Joshua Heschel and Elie Weisel – Judaism is one long excursus on human responsibility.

Over 2700 years ago, the prophet Amos cried out: *higid lecha adam ma tov, u'ma Adonai doreysh mikem* – “It has been told thee O' man what is good and what God demands of us: “To do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with the Lord your God.”

And every Jew who has ever walked the face of the earth since then has spent a lifetime trying to fulfill that mandate – of trying to get the right mix of justice, mercy and humility. For thousands of years we Jews have understood that these are the essential ingredients of the good life – justice, mercy and humility.

To be a Jew means that unlike Alfred E. Neuman – we do worry, we worry a lot, about justice and mercy and humility. To be a Jew means we are not like Charlie Brown who worries about everything – we do not waste our worry on silly things and superficial things – we worry about justice and mercy and humility.

Every Shabbat a young man or a young woman stands on this bema to celebrate their Bar or Bat Mitzvah and we say to them: “Today you are a Man! Today you are a Woman! And of

course, what we mean when we say that – is today you accept the world of responsibility. And we welcome them to the world of guilt. What is that old joke, about the definition of a Jewish telegram: “Start worrying...details to follow.” I guess in one way or another that is what I am saying to each of our B’nai Mitzvah on their special day – “Start worrying – but, don’t sweat the small stuff – worry about justice and mercy and humility.

As your rabbi – lo’ these past 24 years – I have spent most of my time trying to get you to start worrying, I have tried to make you feel guilty. (How am I doing?) I have tried to make you feel other things as well – pride, joy, comfort, peace – but guilt has been a pretty large part of what I do.

Alfred E. Neuman may like to feel good about himself – and Charlie Brown may like to feel bad about himself – but what I want you to feel about yourself is: responsible. I want you to feel good when you make good choices and I want you to feel bad when you make bad choices. On Yom Kippur we are challenged to envision the entire world as if it were perfectly balanced – with an equal number of good deeds on one side of the scale and an equal number of bad deeds on the other –and our choice, what we do next, may make all the difference in the world. We can make the world better, or worse – the choice is ours, the responsibility is ours.

Who is a good Jew? One who accepts this responsibility. For me, it is as simple as that, just as it was as simple as that for Amos 2700 years ago. All, the *mitzvot*, every single one of them, whether it be the kashrut we observe or the Shabbat we carefully follow, the Torah that we study every day – they all have one purpose- to challenge us to be a better person and to make us feel guilty when we do not live up to this challenge. That is why some scholars have referred to Judaism as a wonderful example of a Guilt Society.

What is a guilt society? And if Judaism is an example of one, what other kinds of societies are there? I am glad you asked. Guilt societies like Judaism, rest on a belief in everyone’s fundamental worth. We are all inherently worthy – but our value as individuals rises and falls with the extent to which we realize that inherent value – the extent to which we do the right thing.

In addition to Guilt Societies, sometimes also known as Dignity Societies there are also Honor Societies – also known as Shame cultures. In an honor or shame society a person’s worth is *not* inherent – it is based on reputation. Reputation is everything in honor societies.

The worst sin in a guilt culture like Judaism, is to do wrong. The worst sin in a shame culture is to be disrespected or insulted. To be fair, doing the right thing is important in Shame Cultures – it is just not as important as one’s reputation. And reputation is important in Guilt societies like Judaism – it is just not as important as doing the right thing.

Think of all those stories you learned as a child – the one’s where the rabbi debases himself by collecting wood in the forest to help an old lady so she can have a fire to keep her warm. In all these stories, the rabbi’s honor is less important than doing the right thing- such stories would be unthinkable in honor societies.

On Rosh Hashanah, I explained that “rebuking your friend” according to Judaism, is one of the highest expressions of love. Because I care for you, I want you to do the right thing. That is the way it works in a guilt society.

In a shame society – rebuke is bad form, it is considered a terrible violation of your honor. I know a president who gets upset any time someone criticizes him publicly. I believe this makes more sense if we come to understand that said president seems to place a very high value on honor – and demonstrates many of the values of those who live in honor societies.

I have tried to show why guilt is good. But, even in a guilt society, like Judaism, not all guilt is good guilt. Good guilt is when you feel bad about doing wrong – good guilt is about bad behavior. Bad guilt is when you feel bad about yourself. Bad guilt is when you feel you are a bad person. Remember Judaism believes in the fundamental goodness and inherent value of all human beings – good people can do bad things. Good people can do some very bad things. The challenge is to get you to feel bad about what you are doing – not about who you are.

Guilt is good because accepting responsibility is at the very heart of what it means to be a Jew. To be a Jew means we are not permitted to evade responsibility. To be a Jew means we are not allowed to outsource responsibility to others and play the helpless victim.

When God calls Abraham, he replies with one word: “*Hineni!*” Here I am. One scholar suggested he would translate *Hineni* as – “Yes sir, reporting for duty sir!” When God calls Moses, he replies with one word: “*Hineni!*”

This afternoon we will read the biblical book that records the greatest dereliction of duty in Jewish history: Jonah. Jonah – you may remember does not respond *Hineni* – when God calls. God calls on Jonah to take God’s message to the people of Nineveh in the East. What does Jonah do? He jumps on a ship headed west! A major lesson of this book is that we need to accept that when God calls – our job is to respond; our job is to accept responsibility. It is no coincidence that we read this book on Yom Kippur, the day we are called to account for ourselves.

This past Shabbat we read *parshat Ha’azinu*. Our annual cycle of reading the Torah is reaching its end. And these last few chapters that we are now reading – are Moshe’s final words to his beloved people, a people that he has led for more than 40 years. I was moved as I listened to the Torah this past Shabbat, even though I have heard and studied these words so many times before. Moses, with the angel of death already in sight, prepares to take leave of this life. And I realize that never before had he spoken with such passion. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests: He wants his final words never to be forgotten.

So, Moses says:

Ha’azinu hashamayim, v’adabeyra –

“Give ear O heavens, that I may speak;

Earth, hear the sayings of my mouth...

Hatzeur Tamim Poalo – The Rock, His acts are perfect,

For all His ways are just.

A faithful God without wrong,

Right and Straight is God.

God is not corrupt;

the defect is in His children, a warped and twisted generation.

Is this the way you repay God, ungrateful, unwise people?

Is God not your Father, your Master? God made you and established you. (Deut 32:1-6)

So, what is Moshe's final most passionate speech to his beloved people? What is the final lesson he wishes to impart to them? Don't blame God when things go wrong. Don't believe, says Moshe, that God is there to serve us. We are here to serve God and through God, be a blessing to the world. *Tzadik v'yashar hu* - God is straight; it is we who are complex and self-deceiving. God is not there to relieve us of responsibility. It is God who is calling us to responsibility.

And so, Moshe summarizes in these magnificent words the message of the entire Torah and the challenge of the entire Jewish enterprise. It began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When they sinned, Adam blamed the woman, the woman blamed the serpent. So, it was in the beginning and so it still is in the twenty-first century secular time.

The story of humanity argues Rabbi Sacks, has been for the most part a flight from responsibility. The culprits change. Only the sense of victimhood remains. It wasn't me, it was the woman! It wasn't me, it was the serpent. It was me, it was the politicians. It wasn't the Democrats; it was the Republicans; or it wasn't the Republicans it was the Democrats. It wasn't us, it was the media. Or the bankers, Or our genes. Or our parents. Or the system. Most of all, it is the fault of the others, the ones not like us, the immigrants, the foreigners, the infidels, the sons of Satan, the children of darkness, the unredeemed, the unrepentant. The perpetrators of the greatest crime against humanity were convinced it wasn't them. They were only "obeying orders." And then when all else fails, blame God. And if you don't believe in God, blame the people who do.

Moses understood that to be human was to seek escape from responsibility. And he left us the Torah – this call from which no one can hide, as Adam and Eve discovered when they tried, and you can't escape as Jonah learned in the belly of the fish. Judaism is God's call to human responsibility.

What Moses was saying in his farewell song can be paraphrased thus:

"Beloved people, I have led you for forty years, and my time is coming to an end. I have reviewed with you the important things about your past and your future. I beg you not to forget them. Your parents were slaves. God brought them and you to freedom. But freedom alone will not sustain a society. When everyone is free to do whatever they like, the result is anarchy, not freedom. A free society requires restraint and responsibility. That is why I have taught you all these laws and statutes. God gave us freedom– the most rare, precious, unfathomable thing of all other than life itself, but with freedom comes responsibility. We must take the risk of action. God gave us the land – but we must conquer it and administer it fairly. God gave us fields but we must plough, sow and reap them. God gave us bodies but we must tend and heal them. God made us. God is our father and our mother. But parents cannot live their children's lives. They can only show them by instruction and love how to live.

So, says Moses – the next move is yours. Your choices will create the lives you live. Some of your choices will be wise and some will no doubt be foolish. When things go wrong, don't blame God. God is not corrupt; we are. *Tzadik V'yashar hu* -God is straight, it is we who are sometimes warped and twisted. That is the Torah's ethic of responsibility.

Rabbi Sacks goes on to explain that "Judaism does not see human beings, as some religions do, as irretrievably corrupt, stained by original sin, incapable of good without God's grace. That

is a form of faith, but it is not ours. Nor do we see religion as a matter of blind submission to God's will. That too is a form of faith but not ours.

We do not see human beings, as the pagans did, as the playthings of capricious gods. Nor do we see them, as some scientists do, as mere matter, a gene's way of producing another gene, a collection of chemicals driven by electrical impulses in the brain, without any special dignity or sanctity, temporary residents in a universe devoid of meaning that came into existence for no reason and will one day, equally for no reason, cease to be.

No, we Jews believe that we are God's image, free as God is free, creative as God is creative, on an infinitely smaller and more limited scale to be sure, but still we are the one point in all the echoing expanse of space where the universe becomes conscious of itself, the one life form capable of shaping its own destiny: choosing, therefore free, therefore responsible. Judaism is God's call to responsibility."

Feel guilty because you have not done enough, been good enough, cared enough? Good. Because it is your fault. Not all your fault. But you and I are to blame. Moses, with his final breath gave us one last commandment: Thou shalt not be a victim - ever. Do not believe as the Greeks would later believe that fate is blind and inexorable; our future sealed even before we are born. What a tragic view of the human condition – but one that would be echoed again and again by thinkers as diverse as Spinoza and Marx and Freud, the great triumvirate of Jews-by-descent who rejected Judaism and all its works.

Instead like Victor Frankl, survivor of Auschwitz, founder of cognitive behavioral therapy, we believe we are not defined by what happens *to* us but rather by how we *respond* to what happens to us. The fault is never in our stars – it is always in us. There may be such a thing as an evil decree, but as we recite over and over on these high Holy Days – penitence, prayer and charity can avert it. And what we cannot do alone, we can do together.

This my friends is why I want you to feel guilty. Not because I want you to feel bad, but because I want you to feel responsible. Make no mistake – we are in a battle here. A fight against those who would prefer to see themselves as victims and the world in terms of honor and shame. The voters are angry – we are told, they are looking for someone to blame. Someone else, that is. All honor societies revel in victimhood. Are we Americans becoming such a culture?

Arab cultures are famous for being honor cultures. The Palestinians love to paint themselves as the world's ultimate victims. Even though the founding of the Jewish State produced as many Jewish refugees from Arab countries as it did Palestinian refugees, you don't hear a lot about those Jewish refugees because we Jews accepted the responsibility to house them and feed them and clothe them and find them jobs. Seventy years later they are still more interested in decrying their victimhood than in improving their lot. The worst sin one can commit in many Arab countries is to dishonor and disrespect another. The reason that many Arabs have such a hard time accepting Israel is they cannot forgive her for defeating them time and time again. There is nothing worse in an honor society than to be a loser. Winning is everything. And since compromise is a sign of weakness and loss – compromise is impossible – and so we confront the impasse that has vexed Israel for the past 70 years.

One of the clearest and most horrifying manifestations of honor societies are honor killings. We read these in the newspaper – from time to time – a young man from Turkey or Iran or Saudi Arabia will murder his own sister because she has fallen in love with someone they do not approve of, or gotten pregnant when not married – in these cases the sense of shame is so great, it can only be restored by the most extreme acts of vengeance in the hope that honor will be restored.

In my humble opinion – the major obstacle to peace in the world today – whether it is between Israel and her enemies – the US and Iran or North Korea, between Al Qaeda or ISIS and the world – is that in all of these examples and in so many more, we are speaking one language and they are speaking another. We have one set of values and they have another. How do you talk to someone when you cannot understand them? How do you negotiate with someone who does not share your most basic values? We speak the language of human dignity, of taking responsibility for one's own fate and they speak the language of honor and shame and victimhood.

I worry that things are changing in Israel. That an Israel that never shirked its responsibility and compassion is becoming more and more an honor society that views itself as a victim. And I worry that our own country, America, which has long been a bastion for human dignity in the world – is becoming an honor society as well. Will we go to war with North Korea to protect our honor? Is the worst sin that one politician can do to another – to disagree? Depending on how you measure consensus, between 90% - 100% of scientists, Academies of Science in over 80 countries, more than 95% of climate researchers have concluded that humans are causing global warming or at the very least contributing significantly to it. And yet there are those whose sense of honor is so great that they would rather insist that 95% of the world's scientists might be wrong rather than admit that they might be wrong.

We Jews have no trouble admitting we are wrong. We do it all the time. That is what this day is all about. They would like us to believe that we are all victims – and salvation only comes from somewhere or someone else. There is nothing humans can do to stop climate change – so why even try? We are merely victims of a natural cycle. We believe that we have the power to change ourselves and our world – if only we will accept the responsibility to do so. The key value in a Jewish society is responsibility – that used to be a key American value as well.

Feeling a little guilty? Good we are making progress.

We are about to stand for Yizkor. We pause on this day of accepting responsibility to remember those who are responsible for our very lives. To mothers and fathers who raised us, to brothers and sisters who loved us, to husbands and wives who shared life's journey with us – its trials and tribulations, its sorrows and its joys. We remember children – who died too soon and too young – children for whom we had such high hopes and great dreams. We remember friends who were dear to us in life and in death remain constant companions in our hearts and in our minds.

Do you feel guilty about them? That you didn't love them more, aggravate them less, visit them more often, care for them more diligently? Or maybe you feel you are the victim? Do you feel angry that they didn't love you more, care for you more diligently? Whatever you feel – know that Yizkor is ultimately an exercise in responsibility. It is ok to feel guilty – just not too guilty. It is ok to feel angry just not too angry. Don't be Alfred E. Neuman – who probably never showed

up for Yizkor – I want you to worry. Don't be Charlie Brown – whose whole life was Yizkor – one long act of worry. No - be a Jew – accept responsibility for the things you did right and vow – on this sacred day to change what you do that is wrong.

But, you say, it is too late to fix things with those who are no longer living? Look around you – there are so many who are still in need of your love, and your care. Do right by them – and I believe your loved one will know and smile down on you. Do you really believe that rabbi? Yes, I do.

This is Yom Kippur. For 24 hours, we beat our breasts and confess our sins. We spend 24 hours feeling guilty – for the kind of person we could be, the kind of person we should be - - and the ways we have not lived up to our responsibilities as a husband or wife, as a father or mother, as a son or daughter – as a friend, as a congregant, as a member of this wonderful people and a citizen of this great country – as a human being who recognizes the divine image in all other human beings. This is Yom Kippur. For 24 hours, we say our prayers and promise to do better, strive to be better people.

“What me worry?” Yes, me worry. And I hope you will worry too.