

Shavuot Yizkor 5772
May 28, 2012
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

This has been an interesting sequence – these last few days. We started with Shabbat – then we progressed to Shavuot and celebrated *matan torateynu* -- the giving of the torah and today we mark the second day of Shavuot which is *Yizkor* – and it is Memorial Day as well! That is a lot to assimilate in a few short days.

This confluence of Yizkor and Memorial Day is not an everyday occurrence – the last time it happened was 1985! That's 27 years ago! (Although it will occur again in 2015)

We Jews do Yizkor, memorializing very differently from our non-Jewish friends. And I would like to take just a few moments and see if I can highlight this difference.

How is Memorial Day observed? It is a holiday – very public and very out-going in its commemorations. There are parades with speeches, bands, decorations – a lot of show.

And how do we mark Yizkor – it too is a holy day – but a very different kind of observance – it is inward directed. We come to shul, we sit quietly – no flags or bunting, no parades or music – just quietly sitting and remembering those we have loved and lost.

Very different – very, very different why? Let me see if I can explain.

Have you ever been to Mt. Sinai? Me neither. Actually I have climbed a mountain in the middle of the Sinai desert that some Christians believe is Mt. Sinai - it is a wonderful experience to climb it - but it is probably not Mt. Sinai – the fact is that we don't know much about the place where the greatest event in Jewish history took place. What little we do know comes in the form of legend - as the midrash wrestles with the question of why Sinai out of all the possible places in the world - why this mountain was chosen for the honor of *Matan Torah!*

The Midrash states:

"When God sought to give the Torah to the Israelites, Mount Carmel and Mount Tabor [approached God]. The one said: 'I am called Mount Tabor. It is fitting that the Presence should rest upon me, for I am the highest of all the mountains, and not even the water of the flood overwhelmed me.' And the other said, 'I am called Mount Carmel. It is fitting that the Divine Presence should rest upon me, for I put myself in the middle of the Red Sea, and it was by my help that the children of Israel got across.' "

Notwithstanding these solid qualifications, Mount Tabor and Mount Carmel receive their rejection slips. The Midrash continues:

"The Holy One, blessed be He, replied, 'By the arrogance in you, you have already made yourselves unworthy of My presence.' God said, 'My wish is to dwell only on Sinai because Sinai is the lowliest of all of you,' for, as Scripture says, 'I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and lowly spirit.' [Midrash Tehillim 68:9]

This Midrash suggests that God prefers the humble and has no patience for arrogance and

conceit.

But that's not to say that we shouldn't feel good about ourselves, that we shouldn't have self-respect, or a sense of dignity. As Jews, we are deeply conscious of feeling pride in ourselves as Jews, in our achievements both as individuals and as a people. And in a few weeks time, when our Torah reading will take us through the story of the ten spies who were pessimistic regarding the Israelites chances of conquering the land of Canaan, because, in their view, "*hayinu ka-hagavim*" they were like measly grasshoppers in comparison to the tall, strong and handsome Canaanites, remember that they, the ten spies, were punished for their lack of self-confidence, their lack of faith in themselves and in their own strength.

Yes, a positive self-image is important even necessary to success in life. We spend fortunes on clothing, on cosmetics, on books, on courses, on analysts, all for the purpose of feeling good about ourselves. So how then are we supposed to respond to the rabbinic perception of God as One who wants us constantly to feel humble and unimportant?

The Talmud states [Hullin 89a]: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel, 'I love you because even when I bestow greatness upon you, you humble yourselves before me. I bestowed greatness upon Abraham, yet he said to Me, 'I am but dust and ashes'; (Gen.XVIII. 27) [I also bestowed greatness] upon Moses and Aaron, yet they said: 'And we are nothing....' (Ex. XVI, 8) 'But with the other nations it is not so. I bestowed greatness upon Nimrod, and he said: 'Come, let us build us a city'(Gen. XI, 4) upon Pharaoh, and he said: ' Who is the Lord?' (Ex. V,2) ..., and so on..."

Why does God love us? Not because we're great, evidently. Not because we have far more Nobel laureates than peoples ten times our size. Not because of the strength and successes that we have achieved. That's not why God loves us, at least according to the Talmudic depiction.

Why does God love us? Because, following the examples of Abraham, Moses and Aaron, we have not let our successes, materially, professionally, intellectually, politically, go to our heads. Nimrod was impressed with his power, so he built a tower that he thought would reach heaven and give him divine supremacy. Other kings and leaders of other nations, from ancient times to this very moment, have considered themselves omnipotent. And, one by one, they have fallen, sometimes, taking millions of lives with them.

But Abraham, Moses and Aaron knew to put greatness in perspective. Abraham was extremely wealthy, influential, in addition to being the pre-eminent religious innovator of all times. Not a bad curriculum vitae. So, when Abraham, a stand-out human being if there ever was one, in dialogue with God over the fate of the people of S'dom, told God "I am dust and ashes," God, was duly impressed. Maybe that was why God let Abraham win the argument.

And Moses and Aaron had secured the release of the Israelites from slavery. Their message to the people: "What are we? We, Moses and Aaron, are mere messengers. It is God who has won your freedom. We are nothing." And it is Moses whom the Torah describes as "very humble, the most humble person in the world." Moses, the eternal teacher of the descendants of Israel, our greatest leader, the most humble person in the world!

God loves us, the Talmud tells us, because we follow the lead of Abraham, Moses and Aaron, and refuse to allow great achievement and success to change us.

Think about it. It makes some sense. Egomaniacs are not especially loveable. In order to be loved, we have to put our successes in context. We can still have self-respect, we should like ourselves, but worship of the self is as dangerous and self-destructive as it is obnoxious.

We are all human and to be human means that we have limitations, limitations that all of us, from the manual laborer to the PhD in Biochemistry, share. We make mistakes. We hurt others, we hurt ourselves by what we do or don't do, by what we say or don't say. We neglect those who need our attention. We misjudge, we prejudge, sometimes by accident, sometimes by design. And this humanness - actually and ironically - makes us more lovable, more approachable, more human.

One of the things I like least about politics is that you are never allowed to be wrong. Each side tells us how the other side is wrong – and how they would never make the mistakes their opponent is making. Wouldn't it be nice to hear a politician say – “I don't know.” Or “I'm not sure but this is how I would handle this difficult and complex situation – I may be wrong – but this is what I would do?” Such humility is not permitted in today's political environment – and we are all the poorer for it.

The great strength of this country – has never been our omnipotence. It is not that we always get it right at the outset. The great strength of this country - has been the ability to learn, adjust, and get it right in the end. To learn, to adjust - requires a humility, a willingness to admit you were wrong - that I see lacking in the current political environment - and it worries me.

And these same dynamics operate on the personal level as well. I don't know if many of you have noticed, but your family isn't perfect either. I don't mean this to single you out - my family isn't perfect - no family is perfect - it is in the nature of being human - it comes with the title. And yet - for some reason so many of us have difficulty dealing with the fact of our and our loved ones' imperfections. We have so much trouble accepting that our parents or our children or our spouses – or that we, ourselves, are not perfect.

We now recognize children, who, in previous generations were considered slow, or behavior problems, to have slight or not so slight disabilities that make it impossible for them to learn or function in usual ways. Initials such as A.D.D. (attention deficit disorder), A.D.H.D. (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), are becoming part of parental vocabulary. Now labels in and of themselves - do not accomplish anything - but once we admit there is an issue – once we understand that children learn differently - we can begin to devise strategies to address the challenges they create.

In a way, that is exactly what Torah does for the Jewish people, who, like all people, have limitations, areas of weakness, tendencies to err. What Torah does for us is to teach us skills and strategies to overcome the limitations of being human. We don't refer to them as skills and strategies, we call them *Mitzvot*, but that, in a way, is what they are. And those skills and strategies that make up our tradition go a long way in readying us for the complexities and challenges that life undoubtedly has in store for each and every one of us. Perfect people would not need *mitzvot* – angels are not required to observe mitzvot – only people are.

It's worth noting that virtually all of our Biblical patriarchs and matriarchs had more than their share of failures on the personal front. Their marriages, their relationship with their children, the hatred between siblings, all would be worthy grist for the contemporary talk show circuit. So right from the top down, the Torah makes clear our propensity to do poorly in family relationships, and our need to recognize and grapple with that very human failing, not to be demoralized or defeated by it, but rather to be challenged by it, challenged to try harder, to work harder, to be better children, better parents, better spouses, better siblings. The goal here is not an error free life - it is one that is human enough to admit our mistakes and learn from them.

Failures along the road to success are not only normal baggage of human beings, but also, easily able to be weathered, as long as two conditions are met. What are those conditions? One: that we refuse to give up, that we keep plugging away, not allowing failure or setback to deplete our reservoir of spirit. Two: that one value decency and the feelings of others above any material, academic or personal success. From where I see it, a *mentsh* is always a success.

In a moment, as we turn to Yizkor, we remember a whole variety of *Mentshen* who helped shape our lives. And we loved them not in spite of the fact that they were not perfect, but because they were imperfect. That, in most cases, I suspect, is what made them loveable,- their humanness, their willingness to trust us enough to expose their failings, few or many, to us. We loved them and will continue to remember them with love because of that wonderful humanness that made them imperfect, but more important, made them special to us.

And so as Jews – we come to shul for Yizkor. Our Memorial Day boasts no parades, no bands – no twenty-one gun salutes – for it is not heroes we remember today. It is the everyday people who made up our lives. It is the everyday people who gave us life. The battles they fought were with life and living, with greed and jealousy. Some they won and some they lost, but because they fought the good fight they are deserving of our love and our affection, not because they were heroes but because they were *mentschen*.

Our Torah, our tradition leads us to bridge that gap, to strive for decency in our relationships, integrity in our daily dealings. It is as "*mentshen*" as decent, striving humans that our failures lead to successes, that our seeming insignificance as mortal beings can be elevated to a level of stunning beauty.

And it is that beauty we now pause to remember.