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Temple Israel Natick, tent service
A World without Humility

L'shanah tovah, an easy and meaningful fast. It is a pleasure and an honor to be speaking here in the main sanctuary.

- Our supply of petroleum is certainly not limitless....we'll run out of it in under 100 years.
- In some parts of this country we are running out of water...in Israel we've suffered from drought for over 5 years.
- And the list goes on...

But my concern today is not about the natural resources that we are using up at a phenomenal clip.... although that is a worthy topic....I am more interested in another drought...a moral drought that is becoming a national and international epidemic....our lack of humility. We have too much pride and an overabundance of arrogance and disregard for others.

- In a few hours we'll read the story about the most successful prophet in the Hebrew Bible....Jonah. When God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh to prophesize....Jonah knows better. Jonah decides to preserve his self-image...his world that exists without repentance.
- Jonah should be on a mission from God in Nineveh, but instead he bolts, and attempts to hide from God.
- God gives him explicit directions, gives his life meaning and purpose, but Jonah knows better. He should have been humbled that God selected him, but that isn't who he is.
- Jonah erroneously believes he can hide from God in the depths of the ship, but because of his lack of humility, he thinks he is capable of outwitting God.

The book of Jonah is essentially about God trying to teach Jonah humility.

- God expects Jonah to save Nineveh...but he flees.
- And as a result, he almost brings disaster to the crew of the ship.
- And then he is swallowed by a large fish, a Leviathan, and left alone to contemplate his pride.
- God then brings him into the desert, again, alone.
- And finally, if all of those things haven't taught him humility,

- He is alone in the desert, under the weak shade of a dying tree.

Former Sen. Alan Simpson, R-Wyo., once said, “Those who travel the high road of humility....will not be troubled by heavy traffic.” Jonah doesn’t take the road of humility, the road less traveled; instead he is stuck in the congested lane traffic of pride, arrogance, and concern for himself at the expense of others. Let me explain to you where I am headed this afternoon.

Recently, I began studying the wisdom of the great ethical teachers of Judaism...known as Musar, or the Jewish ethical mindfulness movement. I have studied, Talmud, Bible, *halacha* and *chasidut*...but I have never encountered such levels of inspiration, practical advice and deep wisdom as written by the *Ba’alei haMusar*, or Musarnikim. Their texts, many written in the 19th century, about humility, arrogance, compassion, silence, enthusiasm and responsibility speak to my head and my heart....and I believe they will speak to you as well.

What motivated me was simple....my desire to become a better husband, father, friend and rabbi. After a few months of study, I came to the conclusion that I have finally found direction and a practical course of study. I realized that my journey needed to begin with the foundational *middah* (character trait) of humility.

The best place to begin will be with a few examples of pride and arrogance....the opposite of humility. That will be followed by what we should aspire to....character trait/humility.

1. During the 19th century, there was a Russian Jew, Moses Shapira, who converted to Christianity, and eventually made his way to Israel. Shapira quickly became involved in the antiquities market in Jerusalem, and developed an impeccable reputation and amazing connections. He began making unusual finds that impressed archaeologists worldwide, and eventually became an agent of the greatest cultural institution of the day...the British Museum.

Shapira’s persona grew, and eventually he introduced to the world scraps of parchment that according to him had been written almost 3 thousand years ago. It was an alternate text to Deuteronomy. Many scholars of the day concluded that the texts were a fraud; Shapira was challenged in the court of public opinion by scholars, and lost. He was exposed as a forger...albeit one with incredible talent...clever, brilliant, but a charlatan of the first rank. Eventually, in shame and ignominy, he left his family in Jerusalem, travelled to Holland where he committed suicide after being exposed.

By forging documents that purported to be the most ancient texts of Moses ever found, Shapira displayed remarkable arrogance. What made him think he could fool the greatest scholars of the day, the British Museum, his colleagues? He thought he was smart enough to fool everyone. His arrogance combined with his attitude of superiority and lack of conscience, proved to be his downfall.

2. Second example: A few years ago, I did some Jerusalem guiding with a professor of surgery and writer from Yale, Sheldon Nuland, along with his wife and children. We became friends and I have continued the friendship with his widow. Shep, as he was called, wrote a fascinating book entitled: *How We Die*. Towards the end of the book, he described a case in which he convinced an elderly woman at the end of her life, to undergo a surgery that might improve her quality of life. The woman wanted to die, there was no hope for a cure, but she allowed herself to undergo surgery because the doctor urged her to trust him. The surgery failed and when she woke up, and realized she had been deceived, she was furious. Dr. Nuland realized that he had been paternalistic and arrogant. In searing honesty, Nuland exposes his sin of arrogance and castigates himself for not being humble.

3. A third example: One of my closest friends is the medical director for a new, major hospital, who has been serving as a doctor to doctors for many years. When I told him my sermon topic, he shared two stories and gave me permission to use them.

There was a surgeon on his staff, one of the best he has ever seen. Unfortunately, this professor had an ego to match his talent. One day, while on rounds with a group of young surgical residents, he asked them to suggest a course of action for a particularly difficult to diagnose patient. The professor listened to their responses, and then negating them all, said “this is the problem; this is the surgery I will be doing”. One particularly precocious young resident, who is now himself a top-notch surgeon and professor, waited until they left the room, (out of deference to the patient) and then told the surgeon he thought the diagnosis was incorrect. “Please reconsider. Try something else”.

The professor listened, disagreed, and said “we’ll do the surgery my way”. As a result of doing it his way, the patient died. Had he listened to the student he most likely would have saved the patients life. Because of his arrogance, he wasn’t willing to consider another opinion...he shut down all discussion, and the results were tragic.

I listened to my friend incredulously...and then he added...”if I spoke to this surgeon today, he would still believe he didn’t make a mistake. He never learned from his fatal error”.

4. Fortunately, my friend also told me an uplifting story about doctors and humility. My friend, the medical director, used to be in charge of a seminar at a prominent medical school at which residents and other doctors would present cases and take questions. He ran the program with another doctor, a man who was revered by his colleagues and students.

During one seminar, the revered doctor presented a case in front of 200 residents. It was a very difficult case in which he made a series of mistakes in diagnosis. Two hundred residents listened to a living legend explain step by step, how he jeopardized the life of an innocent man. Fortunately, he realized his mistakes before they became tragic...and the patient recovered. As they listened to this remarkable confession, many of the residents began to weep. Afterwards, a number of them came up to him, hugged him, and thanked him for the most important teaching moment of their lives.

What did he teach them?

This doctor taught these young physicians the most important lesson of their professional and perhaps personal lives....humility. He allowed them to step off their pedestal, and realize that medicine is a profession that requires collaboration. Nobody has a corner on the market for the wisdom, we all need to pursue truth with the help of others. And unless you are humble....you will lose your way.

What then is true humility? Let me offer some examples:

On August 15th, 1945, the day after V-J Day, a variety show was broadcast for the troops fighting during WWII. The show featured Cary Grant, Bette Davis, Marlene Dietrich and Frank Sinatra. Near the beginning of the show, Bing Crosby summarized the mood of the country after winning WWII: Instead of beginning with fanfare and chest-thumping, he began the show with the overall sentiment of the country....“Today...our deep-down feeling is one of humility.” Counterintuitive...to say don't celebrate, be humble, but that was okay.

Burgess Meredith then read a passage written by Ernie Pyle, the war correspondent who had been killed a few months before. Before he died, Pyle, believing that victory was imminent, wrote an article about the meaning of the victory: And I quote: “We won this war because our men are brave and because of many other things—because of Russia, England, and China and the passage of time and the gift of nature's materials. We didn't win it because destiny created us better than all other people. I hope that in victory we are more grateful than proud. I hope we can rejoice in victory—but humbly. The dead men would not want us to gloat.”

Pyle anticipated the sentiments of many of the greatest generation.... modesty, humility, the attitude of gratitude. People didn't go around chest-thumping, proclaiming how great the US is, how we destroyed the enemy. After all, millions on all sides had died, two atomic bombs had devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 6 million Jews had been murdered in cold-blood, Europe lay in ruins. This moment, he warned, called for humility, not triumphalism.

Another example: When he was running for president, George Bush the elder, who fought in WWII, was not comfortable speaking about himself. There is a well-known story about the times when speechwriters put in the word "I" to his speeches. When they did that, he crossed it out. Finally, his staff prevailed upon him....**you** are running for president...you **must** talk about yourself. And so he did. But whenever he did, he'd get a call from his mother..."George, you're talking about yourself again." And so he stopped what is second nature today...self-promotion.

David Brooks writes poignantly: "Humility is freedom from the need to prove you are superior all the time, but egotism is a ravenous hunger in a small space---self-concerned, competitive, and distinction-hungry." Humility is infused with lovely emotions like admiration, companionship, and gratitude.

More and more, we find ourselves living in the opposite universe. We live in an age of intellectual arrogance that threatens our ability to speak with one another. Michael Lynch, a thoughtful philosopher argues that intellectual humility is a cluster of attitudes that lead us to recognize our fallibility, our limitations and biases. Intellectual humility requires us to collect solid evidence, analyze it and then make decisions. It requires us to listen to the facts presented to us by others, not only those we discovered ourselves.

An article in the Harvard Business Review (2014), argues persuasively that the most successful leaders possess an abundance of humility. Here are two main points that stood out to me:

- In order to be successful, leaders must share their mistakes as teachable moments. When leaders share their fallibility, they legitimize growing and learning to be better. Sound familiar?
- Effective leaders engage in dialogue, not debates. They aren't interested in winning arguments, they don't need to show how smart they are...they are learners. And they model this behavior to their staff.

And finally, it should be emphasized that humility does not preclude greatness or success or wealth. The greatest leader the Jewish people

have known, is of course Moses, a man described as being “very humble.” When he couldn’t handle all legal cases himself, his father-in-law Jethro suggested that he delegate...Moses listened. And Moses demonstrates his humility when he details the material and costs to build the mishkan...the desert tabernacle. Moses is given gifts from his people, but he doesn’t say...trust me...he lists what he did with these gifts.

Transparency is not a new phenomena...it was practiced by Moses in the bible, in Parshat Pekudei, and it teaches us that humility in leaders is necessary if they wish to inspire.

My friends, permit me to humbly suggest that during the season of repentance...the key to repentance is the ability to look at the evidence and admit/confess that we have erred. True humility leads to true repentance. Everything else...is self-deception. Please, please remember ...humility is not self-effacement, self-abnegation....humility is not *shiflut*-self-abasement. Judaism does not expect you to be a Mother Teresa nor does it want you to abase, negate yourself. It is the ability to confess sin, recognizing wrongdoing and try to repair the damage to others, and to our soul.

Speaking of sin....after all...it is Yom Kippur....I want to tell you a true story.

When I began my 7 years of being a congregational rabbi in Virginia, I was asked by a local church to join a panel of pastors, rabbis and scholars to discuss the Christian and Jewish views of sin. The pastors got up and essentially said....I’m for repentance, and against sin...I’m for good and against evil. It was then and there that I knew that if ever I was reincarnated....it would be as an evangelical preacher!

One of the speakers told a story that allegedly took place in a church in his denomination. The pastor got up and delivered a fire and brimstone sermon, railing against the sins of those created with flesh and blood. At one point he said; “My friends, lets put it to a vote: All of those who are against sin....stay seated.” The entire congregation remained seated, and you could hear a pin drop. The reverend then said....”all those who support sin....stand up.”

All of a sudden, a shmendrick who had fallen asleep during the sermon, jumped up, looked around, and said “Reverend, I don’t know what we’re voting on, but it looks like you and I are the only ones for it!!!

The founder of the Musar movement in the 19th century, Rabbi Israel Salanter once told a powerful story about humility:

- “When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world.

- But I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my country.
- When I found I couldn't change my country, I began to focus on my town.
- However, I discovered that I couldn't change the town, and so as I grew older, I tried to change my family.
- Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself.
- But I've come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, and then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country and we could all indeed have changed the world."

True humility, in this case, led Salanter to conclude there are limits to what we can accomplish. I should have started trying to fix myself, because had I accomplished that early on, I might have been able to repair the world. Note...no self-absement, humility is often the ability to be aware just how great you can be.

Conclusion:

In a sense, then, we are all like Jonah:

- all of us flee from our responsibility
- we are not sufficiently awed and humbled by the tasks that life places in front of us.
- Instead of listening to the wisdom of those wiser and more powerful, we insist we know better.

Rabbi Stephanie Kraus wrote an inspirational poem about Jonah that achingly summarizes our dilemma:

"He learns about humility the hard way.

Just like we do...

This lesson is never learned once and for all...

Or in life.

God teaches and reteaches humility.

Jonah learns and relearns modesty.

Just like we do.

Every year.

On Yom Kippur.

God's voice silences Jonah.

And only then can he swallow his pride."

I have tried to share with you my new discovery that has helped me to improve my character and remind me what I need to do. You may be able to be gently challenged to improve your character.

I approach my attempts at soul-repair with humility. A quiet confidence that the space I occupy in this world is improving, as I try to improve myself. I pray that you can utilize this approach...beginning with humility, that can give us the ability to look at life with radical amazement and awe....once again.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, Lord, my Rock and Redeemer. Gut Yontif!