Rosh Hashanah 5779 Rabbi Daniel H. Liben

The Better Angels of Our Nature

*Shanah Tovah*- A Happy and Healthy New Year! Just a few minutes ago, we sang together: *Hayom, Harat Olam*: *Today, the World was Born*! Yet, according to the Rabbis, the day that God spoke the world into creation was five days ago, and today, Rosh Hashanah, marks the 6th day of creation: the day on which God created the first Human Being.

According to a Rabbinic Midrash, *that* creation almost didn’t happen- Adam the first person, almost never came into being! Picture this scene: towards the end of the sixth day, the Heavenly Angels gathered around Gods’ throne, and divided themselves into two groups: those who favored the creation of Human Beings, and those who opposed.

First, Love – *Hesed*- spoke up, saying, “Let him be created because he will perform acts of *Hesed*.” Leading the opposing camp was the angel of *Emet*-Truth. Truth said, “Let him not be created, because all of him will be falsehood.” Righteousness said, “Let him be created because he will do righteous deeds.” Peace opposed, saying, “Let him not be created, because he will be all strife.” So what did God do? He took Truth and cast it to the ground! The Ministering Angels dared say to the Holy One, “Master of the Universe, why do You humiliate Your Seal (for Truth is the seal of God)?”

While the ministering angels were conferring and disputing with one another, what did God do? In that moment, God went ahead and created Adam. Turning towards the angels, God said, “What are you going on about? It’s already done! I have created him!”

So why did God ignore the advice of Truth and Peace? Observing our complicated and often violent natures, *and* the world that *we* have created, the Rabbis who wrote this Midrash are admitting that God was taking a big chance on us on that sixth day. *Emet* and *Shalom*- Truth and Peace- had a good point. Regarding *Emet*, we human beings are awfully skilled at obscuring the truth, by rationalizing away and ignoring what is right in front of us. We lie to others, and to ourselves. We subtly bend the truth to suit our needs.

Living in an age of increasingly sophisticated tools at our disposal to access information has not made things any better; in fact, it may even be worse. Crackpot conspiracy theorists have the same access to your inbox as responsible news outlets. Advertisers plant fake stories to entice us to click on their sites, unfriendly nations use misinformation to disrupt our democratic discourse in ways that were never before possible. It is hard to sort out just what is true, and alarmingly, many people seem to have simply stopped trying.

Katie Couric, the respected and successful TV news reporter, said that if she were a young person starting out today, she might not choose journalism as a career. Because, more than in the past, people seem less interested in acquiring “information” than in “affirmation.” We listen to the people and media that confirm our entrenched beliefs, discounting any data that doesn’t fit our picture as “fake news.” And we are all guilty of this, because we crave certainty, and it is the path of least resistance.

And shalom- Peace? That angel was right too. For all our talk of peace, we are all too often divided and in conflict; as nations, within our communities, and within our own hearts.

*And yet*, God chose to create Adam over the angels’ objections… because God knew that people cannot be judged by the standards of angels.

I suspect that most of you, like me, don’t have a place for angels in your personal theology, and rarely think about them, if at all, even though the Bible and later Jewish texts are filled with them. But, bear with me here for a moment; because what I’m really interested in is what we can learn about ourselves, about our own natures, from the metaphorical roles that these angels play.

According to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, the defining characteristic of angels in the Jewish tradition is that they are *not embodied,* and that they are *singular and unchanging*. The very opposite of you and me, angels are untroubled by conflicting emotions and motivations; singular, uncomplicated, and unchanging. Similar to Plato’s realm of pure ideas, they have no physical substance, yet the qualities they represent are quite real. And those qualities, both good and bad, are the warp and woof of life: Truth, peace, compassion, love, striving, anger, jealousy, all the emotional states that, as human beings in this world, we must confront, contend with, and welcome in.

In the Torah, angels are often Holy messengers, delivering to human beings a Divine insight, as in this morning’s Torah reading. Remember, for example, the angel who stays Abraham’s hand from slaying Isaac, or who opens Hagar’s eyes to a life-giving well. In both instances, it is an angel who opens the human heart and mind to a more expansive understanding of what is possible in life.

Let’s take a look at a different example from Genesis: the angels in Jacob’s dream. You’ve all heard the story: Jacob was forced to flee from home, after his brother Esau has threatened (not without reason) to kill him. Alone and frightened, with nothing to use as a pillow under his head but a rock, Jacob dreams of a ladder planted in the ground, yet reaching into the heavens, with angels going up and coming down that ladder. Jacob awakes transformed, declaring, “Surely God was right here, in this place!” In that moment, Jacob’s fear is less overwhelming, and he senses somehow that his life is held by something larger.

So many commentaries seek to understand and explain the meaning of this dream, with its flow of angels ascending and descending. Let me share with you how I have come to understand it: When Jacob wakes up, he’s not just waking up from sleep, he’s waking into a greater awareness about the possibilities, and responsibilities, in his life. When Jacob sees the ladder, he knows that he is really looking at himself. All of us- you, Jacob, and me- are like that ladder. Our feet are planted in the world, rooted in our physical nature, our needs and desires. Yet, we also reach upward: aspiring to connect to something higher, to be lifted up out of our separateness, and to be held by a greater wholeness. For me, the angels going back up the ladder are the angels- or demons- that Jacob is letting go of in that moment: the striving, the deceptions, the unhealthy desires and fears that have brought him to this point in his life. And the angels descending the ladder represent the qualities that his heart is able to receive in that moment of expanded consciousness: acceptance, humility, courage in the face of uncertainty…faith. In that moment of awakened awareness, Jacob is welcoming in *the better angels of his nature.*

Angels, having no physical needs, and being singular and unchanging, do not, cannot, strive to change the world, because, as they are already whole and complete, they do not yearn or dream, as we do, for things to be other than they are.

We, however, who know both joy and sorrow, generosity and jealousy, courage, cowardice and fear, all within this same body; we are beings of imagination and of yearning. We call upon the better angels of our nature, when we are able to receive them, to improve our lot and the lot of others, to be partners with God in the unfolding creation and completion of this world. That ability to grow, to be better that we are, and to create a more loving and compassionate world; *that’s why God created us*, ignoring the warnings of Truth and Peace. That is essentially, what we affirm and celebrate today.

The “better angels of our nature… ” Steven Pinker borrowed that phrase for the title of his 2011 book, in which he documents the gradual decline of violence in the world. The book paints a picture of massive declines in violence of all forms, from war, to improved treatment of children, over the course of history. Pinker presents a mass of historical evidence, charts and graphs to prove his claim, even though we often perceive the opposite to be true. However, Pinker’s most important point is that further decline of violence is *not inevitable*. Future progress depends on forces harnessing our better motivations such as empathy and reason: “the better angels of our nature.”

If you check for the original source for that phrase, you will find that it comes from President Abraham Lincoln’s first inaugural address. In March of 1861, the country teetered on the brink of civil war when Lincoln spoke to the American people. Nearing the end of his talk, Lincoln told a divided nation, “*I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature*.”

You can hear Lincoln’s words transcend his own time and place. Today as then, fear threatens to narrow our vision, raising the rhetoric, and reducing every conflict to a zero sum game. Desire limits our capacity for generosity, and pride weakens our will to pursue peaceful solutions to our disagreements. Yet, the solution that Lincoln suggests to the overwhelming crisis of his society is both radically simple, and eternally true: We begin with the individual. We begin with ourselves, each of us, you and me, doing the work to nurture the better angels of our nature.

Judaism has a centuries old tradition, called *Mussar,* or Ethical Literature, that is devoted to cultivating a person’s moral virtue. *Mussar* calls on us to do the work of *Tikkun Midot. Tikkun* means repair, and *midah*, literally, “measure,” is the word we use for “character trait,” or “soul trait.” Our task, throughout life is to regulate the measure of those traits, each of which exist in us on a continuum. Take for example the character trait of humility, or *anavah.* A paucity of humility might express itself in a person who tends to dominate a conversation, or who always like to have the last word. On the other hand, an excess of *anavah* (humility) might lead a person to check herself from ever expressing an opinion. Each of those people has some work to do to regulate their *midah* of humility. In *Tikkun Midot* work, we study the trait in its fullness, and try to take an honest look at how it manifests in our lives.

We pick a focus phrase that will keep our attention drawn to that *midah* throughout the week. If I am working on humility, I might use a phrase like, “No more than my space, no less than my place,” and write it down on a post-it note, to keep in my pocket, or post somewhere I will see it every day. Then, I decide on a daily practice, something simple and achievable. If I am the person who always dominates the conversation, I might take on as a practice for the week, to always wait until others have spoken first. If I am the person who has trouble speaking up, I might take upon myself the practice of never leaving a conversation without offering an opinion.

In Tikkun Midot work, we pair up with a *hevruta*, a trusted study partner, and talk through together our challenges dealing with this trait. We meet regularly with a *Va’ad,* or larger group, in which we support each other in our work. We begin to recognize our choice points, the moments when we make a decision to act habitually or wisely, with greater awareness.

With each trait, we also want to aim for flexibility, rather than one fixed measure. Let’s say, for example, you are standing in a group of coworkers around the water cooler and someone makes a blatantly racist or sexist. Do you respond, or let it go? How do you decide? How much, or how little, of the quality of humility do you wish that you have at that moment?

Contemporary Musar practice has its origins in the work of a nineteenth century Lithuanian Rosh Yeshiva and scholar, Rabbi Israel Salanter. He not only revitalized popular interest in the study of Musar; he created a movement which, though almost destroyed by the Holocaust, did survive, and has begun to thrive again (in of all places) here, in 21st century America.

Some of you may know that Tikkun Midot groups have been forming throughout the Boston Jewish community in the last few years. Recently, we have started such a group here, at Temple Israel. Please, talk to me in the next few weeks if you want to know more about this, and possibly join out Tikkun Midot Va’ad.

What energizes modern Musar is Salanter’s conviction that *Tikkun Midot*, repairing the soul, is both a spiritual practice, and a necessary step towards *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world. It’s a practice, because working with our soul traits is life-long work. It’s a gradual practice of shedding light on our inner motivations and inclinations, and working on them. We don’t have to complete it, we don’t have to be perfect, we just have to work at it.

It is vital to the work of Tikkun Olam, because Salanter understood, from both a practical view as well as from a spiritual perspective, that we are not separate from the whole. An imperfect soul is a fractal, a microcosm, of an imperfect society. Consider for a moment the #metoo movement. The courage of a few women to speak up in the face of unconscionable, even criminal misogynist behavior, caused a bright light to shine for all of us on societal patterns that have been evident for years. The question I ask myself is, how am I complicit? Why didn’t I see this before? How is it that the vast majority of us let things ride, and said nothing, even as people we know and love suffered abuses, large and small, for years?

Sometimes, we are blind to injustices of all kinds- racial, economic, gender related, that are right in front of our eyes, not because we are bad, but because we are asleep to them: we have been conditioned throughout our lives not to see them. And today, the Shofar calls upon us to wake ourselves up…even though it would be easier to stay asleep! We have to do the inner work of *tikkun midot* in order to rouse ourselves to the outer need for *tikkun olam*, repair in our world.

The final question I want to ask today is just what do we mean by *Tikkun Olam*? In the Talmud, the Rabbis use the term very specifically: it refers to a legal action taken by the Rabbis in order to redress certain unintended consequences of anexisting law, consequences that cause economic or social hardship. They amended the law in order to right an injustice- that is *Tikkun Olam* in the Talmud. Although the Talmud’s examples refer to Rabbinic innovations whose impact is limited to Jewish/Rabbinic society, it seems a small leap to apply the goal of repair to society at large. This was always the goal of Judaism, beginning with God’s calling upon Abraham to be a blessing, through whom all nations would be blessed.

But the inherent universalism of the phrase *Tikkun Olam* is more explicit in our liturgy, where the prayer Aleynu calls on God “*L’taken Olam B’Malchut Shadai*: To repair the world under the Kingship of God.” Aleynu, I’m sure you know, was originally a High Holiday Prayer, and only later on became a part of the daily liturgy. Today, we are once again called upon to be God’s partners in that process of *Tikkun.*

*Tikkun Olam* takes on an even wider, more radical aspect in Jewish mystical literature. According to Kabbalah, every time you or I do a mitzvah, we are repairing a brokenness within the Universe and restoring Divine energy to God (Bet you didn’t know you were so powerful)!

So what do we mean when we say *Tikkun Olam*? All of these things. When we work to transform ourselves, to more fully actualize our potential to act *lovingly, fearlessly, truthfully*- more like our *better angels*- then we are effecting repair on every level of this world.

Let me conclude with a story about Rabbi Israel Salanter. *It was the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah, and Rabbi Salanter was on the way to the Synagogue for Selichot services. Suddenly, he felt a tear in his shoe so he looked around town to see if a shoemaker was still open for work at that late hour. Finally, he located a shoemaker sitting in his shop working next to his candle. Rabbi Salanter walked in and asked him, "is it too late now to get my shoes repaired?" The shoemaker replied, “As long as the candle is burning, it is still possible to repair." Upon hearing this, Rabbi Salanter ran to the synagogue and preached to the public what he learned from the shoemaker: As long as the candle is burning, as long as one is still alive, it is always* possible *to repair- to do tikkun- within our our souls, and in the world.*

*L’Shanah Tovah Tikateivu: May we all be blessed with a sweet New Year, a year of health, of happiness and of healing, of seeing more clearly and lovingly, and may we come to know the better angels of our nature. Amen*