

ROSH HASHANA 5774
HUMILITY
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

One Kol Nidre eve the Rabbi was overcome as he recited the opening prayer that acknowledges the sins of the synagogue leaders, and asks for G-d's help to lead the congregation. He threw himself on the floor before the open Ark and cried out, "G-d, I am nothing." When the Hazzan heard the murmur of approval in the congregation, he also threw himself down and shouted, "G-d, I am nothing." As the congregational buzz grew even louder, the synagogue president followed suit, practically screaming as her body hit the carpet, "G-d, I am nothing." At which point the Hazzan nudged the Rabbi and whispered, "Look who wants to be a nothing now."

There is not another time during the year more than the High Holidays when we feel our sense of smallness. Life and death issues are placed squarely before us. In the U'Netane Tokef prayer we say, "Who shall live and who shall die," as we recognize the limited scope of our power. On Yom Kippur we bare our very souls as we remove all physical amenities from our bodies – food, drink, and even leather shoes. The modest shoes that we wear are symbolic of the humility with which we should view ourselves as we confess our failings over the past year.

Yet, there is some positive return for this feeling of smallness. Judaism extols the value of *Anava* – Humility, as a positive approach to life. Abraham protests before his G-d: "Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I, who am but dust and ashes." Moses, the greatest of men in Jewish tradition is described as the most humble: "Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth." According to Louis Jacobs, "greatness and humility, in Hebraic tradition, are not incompatible. They complement each other. The greater the man the more humble he is expected to be and is likely to be."

We Jews are asked to emulate G-d and to imitate His actions. In a remarkable passage in the tractate of Megillah the rabbis do not hesitate to speak of the humility of G-d: "Rabbi Yochanan said, "Wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you find His humility." He then goes on to substantiate this concept by quoting verses written in the Torah, repeated in the Prophets, and stated a third time in the Writings. This passage found its way into our service at the end of Shabbat. In the quiet meditations read just before Havdalah we recite this passage. Its presence there is to remind us that as we return to our weekly concerns we should not be so caught up in our own interests. We must emulate G-d not only with our rest on Shabbat, but also by our actions throughout the coming week.

It seems to me that in our day and age when we believe that we have mostly conquered the worlds of knowledge, exploration, space, technology, and medicine, when we believe that if we don't have the answers today we will surely attain them in the near future, humility is a value extremely important both for the individual and for society at-large. It is this concept which is an essential part of the Days of Awe.

On an individual level people are remembered for their humility which extends also to their caring for others. When one is humble one recognizes the gratitude that should be present for the gifts with which one is presented.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, until this September the Chief Rabbi of England, tells two stories of individuals who made a great impression upon him. One was John Major, the British Prime Minister, and the other was Prince Charles. He writes that as Chief Rabbi he and his wife were expected to hold dinner parties for people both within and outside the Jewish community. Usually, at the end of a dinner party, he found that the guests would thank the hosts. Only once, though, did a guest not only thank the hosts but also ask to be allowed to go into the kitchen to thank those who made the meal. Rabbi Sacks felt that this was an act of great sensitivity. The person who did it was John Major, then British Prime Minister.

In 2001, on the 300th anniversary of Bevis Marks, the oldest synagogue in Britain, Prince Charles came to the synagogue. He met members of the community as well as the leaders of Anglo-Jewry. What impressed Rabbi Sacks is that he spent as much time talking to the young men and women who were doing security duty as he did to the guests. People recognize that when royalty comes to visit, security must be tight throughout the facility and usually these individuals are not noticed. However, this time Prince Charles did notice them and, according to Rabbi Sacks, made them feel as important as anyone else on that glittering occasion.

Greatness is shown in the way one acts towards another human being. Showing gratitude to others is part of a humble nature and when those, such as a British Prime Minister or a member of the royal family, impress a Chief Rabbi, then the lesson has been taught.

Sometimes a humble individual is found in the most unusual of places. This has been quite a baseball season. Many years from now when the history of the 2013 season will be written in baseball lore, I think it will be recalled for the performance-enhancing drug suspensions. However, it should really be remembered as the season of the farewell tour of the greatest relief closer of all time, the Yankee's Mariano Rivera. At 43 years of age Rivera still has all his skills and returned to baseball this season after a year of injury. What is most impressive is the type of person he is and what he has done as he has travelled from stadium to stadium. Baseball fans have recognized that they have seen greatness and in each case he has been honored with great accolades. But Rivera went to the Yankee's Director of Communications, Jason Zillo, and said he wanted to do something rather unique.

They devised a plan for him to meet privately with different people from every city in which the Yankees played this season, all of them behind the scenes people. They have included special fans, employees, individuals who groom the field for play, a press box attendant, and others. When he came to U.S. Cellular Field this past August, his rule was he would meet only with those who don't wear ties. And, in each case, his meetings have taken place without cameras or press present. He has spent time with the so-called "little people" listening to their stories, giving autographs, and seeing them as real human beings.

Greatness is found in a humble nature. A humble individual recognizes one's place in the world showing gratitude to those around him. One learns to appreciate the gifts that have been bestowed upon him, understanding his role in society.

The rabbis tell us that one of the reasons that the Torah was presented by G-d to the Jewish people on Mt. Sinai is that this was the lowest of the mountains. It is not of the highest peaks soaring up to the sky, but finds itself in the midst of a mountain range with many mountains higher than it. The first time G-d appears to Moses is at the burning bush, a thorn bush in the midst of a desert, to show G-d's presence in all things. When Elijah wants to find G-d he flees into the desert and soon recognizes that G-d is not in the fire, the wind or the quaking of the earth, but in the "still small voice." If G-d's presence, voice, and Torah is found in these lowly places, how much more so should we recognize our humility in the world around us?

Dr. Byron Sherwin has written that "Pride is dangerous because it is a form of the greatest sin – idolatry. Idolatry means treating something other than G-d as if it were G-d." He writes that "Humility is the opposite of pride. Authentic humility is meant to be a strength, not a weakness... Humility can serve as a conduit to articulating human meaning... Humility is not the enemy of self-esteem, but of pride. Humility is a necessary ingredient in the creation of an artful life, a life of meaning, goodness, and significance."

The concept of humility forces us to understand that we are not the center of the universe, nor should we be. It creates the need for companionship and community. In that sense, I would suggest, it is an extremely important concept for our day and age. We live in the era of the computer age, the Facebook nation, and the Twitter universe. Sitting before our computer screen, holding our i-Phone or Blackberry, we can communicate with anyone in the world in real time. Kenneth Gerben has written that our new motto is "I link, therefore, I am."

Even the language we use has changed. On the eve of Rosh Hashana my sister sent me a comic strip which tells the story perfectly. A congregant approached the Rabbi just before Rosh Hashana and said: "Rabbi, I have attended your classes but it's brought me nothing but hassle." The Rabbi responded: "Rosh Hashana is a time to ask for forgiveness. Please accept my sincere apology for whatever harm I may have caused." The congregant replied: "Not this time Rabbi, I can no longer trust you." The Rabbi was very despondent and said: "At least tell me what I have done wrong!" The congregant looked at the Rabbi and said: "You told me, on Rosh Hashana it's a Jewish custom to dip an apple in honey... and now my laptop is on the fritz!!" An apple is no longer a fruit.

Using search engines we find knowledge at our finger tips and we expect instantaneous gratification. We can assess our lives as self-sufficient, not needing others, and in doing so indulge in the worship of self. The language of today is telling: "see my Facebook page," "read my Blog" or "Follow me on Twitter." The question is whether all of this makes us better people, more successful in living life to its fullest, and in creating committed and caring communities for all.

Jonathan Safran Foer has written: "Most of our communication technologies began as diminished substitutes for an impossible activity. We couldn't always see one another face-to-

face, so the telephone made it possible to keep in touch at a distance. One is not always home, so the answering machine made a kind of interaction possible without the person being near his phone. Online communication originated as a substitute for telephonic communication, which was considered, for whatever reasons, too burdensome or inconvenient. And then texting, which facilitated yet faster, and more mobile, messaging. These inventions were not created to be improvements upon face-to-face communication, but a declension of acceptable, if diminished, substitutes for it.”

Foer suggests that over time we began to prefer the diminished substitutes. It is easier to make a phone call than to schlep to see someone in person. Leaving a message on someone’s machine is easier than having a phone conversation. Shooting off an email is easier, still, because we can do it on our own time. Texting is even easier than that as we don’t have to be articulate in our sentences nor correct in our spelling. He writes that each step “forward” has made it easier to avoid the emotional work of being present, to convey information rather than humanity. “The problem with accepting – with preferring - diminished substitutes, is that over time, we, too, become diminished substitutes. People who become used to saying little become used to feeling little.”

Foer said these words in a 2013 commencement address at Middlebury College. He was talking to the next generation of community leaders and parents. He suggested that technology celebrates connectedness, but encourages retreat. The computer screen can never and will never take the place of human interaction. In a recent Blondie cartoon, Alexander is thrilled to tell his father that “I have over 200 friends on Facebook.” Dogwood asks him: “ever meet any of them?” Alexander replies: “not face-face.” That is the problem. We don’t have to be involved with people face-to-face. We can interface with them in cyberspace.

Sherry Turkle in her book *Alone Together – Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* has written that although we are constantly connected and communicating, it comes at the expense of real conversation and meaningful connections. She writes that “We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We’d rather text than talk.”

Community is ultimately the product of personal interactions, with individuals talking to one another as they look into one another’s eyes. Rabbi Norman Lamm in his explanation of the Talmudic dictum, “either companionship or death” suggests the following interpretation: “Without the possibility of human relatedness, man is empty. Without an outside world of human beings, there can be no inside world of meaningfulness. Personality, liberty, love, responsibility – all that makes life worth living – depends upon a community in which a person can locate and realize himself.”

We are beginning to do away with those types of communities. We think of ourselves as self-sufficient and in our grandiose beliefs think that we can handle all that comes our way. With a click of a computer button or the power of the internet, we seem to think we can control our lives. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur remind us through our liturgy and our rituals that we are

not in total control of many of the most important factors of life. It also teaches us to see ourselves as part of an actual larger community as we gather on the High Holidays in great numbers hoping and praying that the year to come is a good one.

Taking this to heart, we recognize in a spirit of humility how we are dependent upon our community and upon our relationship with G-d. In reflecting upon our place in community we appreciate our place in the world, and as we appreciate our place in the world we understand our reliance upon our Creator and our personal responsibility in establishing a relationship with Him. As Ron Wolfson has written, “The purpose of Judaism – the purpose of relationships – is to love the other and the Other (G-d).” “When you do,” he writes, “you find meaning – an understanding of the significance of life; you find purpose – an imperative to do what you are put on earth to do during your life; you find belonging – a community of people who will be there for you and with you; and you find blessing – a feeling of deep satisfaction and gratitude, a calendar and life cycle of opportunities to celebrate the gifts of life.”

This is a lesson we can all learn on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. We are dependent upon many people. We are dependent upon our families, our friends, and our community to educate us, nurture us and be present with us not merely in cyberspace but in their physical presence. We are dependent upon our G-d who has placed us on this earth and has given us the responsibility to create a better world. And, we are dependent upon our recognizing all of this. For in our recognition we can understand both what greatness and humility is all about. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less.”

As we all know, Jewish life is filled with debates and conflicting opinions. No book emphasizes this more than the Talmud itself. In a passage in Eruvin we are taught a most important lesson. After a lengthy disagreement on a major issue, a Bat Kol, a heavenly voice, is heard saying “the utterances of both the school of Shammai and the School of Hillel are the ‘words of the living G-d,’ but the law agrees with the ruling of the School of Hillel.” Why? the Rabbis asked: Because the followers of Hillel were kindly and modest. They not only studied the rulings of the School of Shammai, they even mentioned these rulings before their own. “This teaches that whoever humbles himself, G-d raises up, and whoever exalts himself, G-d humbles. From the person who seeks greatness, greatness flees, but the person who flees from greatness, greatness follows.”

Greatness is found in a humble nature, recognizing our place in the universe, adding our contribution to the community and, at the same time, feeling good enough about ourselves to know that this is our task. I pray that as we begin the year of 5774 that we may take these lessons to heart, following the paths of Abraham and Moses, the School of Hillel and the Almighty Himself as we join together with others to create strong, healthy, and caring communities.