

EREV ROSH HASHANA
BE A MENSCH
September 20, 5778
Rabbi Vernon Kurtz

A Shtetl Jew came to the big city for the first time. When everyone stared at him in his shabby clothes, he decided to buy a new suit. He returned to the village and proudly put on his new suit but it did not fit. He rushed back to the tailor, and the merchant laughed at him. “Of course, it doesn’t fit. You put the new suit over your old clothes. You have to take off the old before you can put on the new.”

We come to the Synagogue this evening as we commence the year 5778 to look at our lives and to see how to improve upon ourselves and our world. Sometimes it takes just putting on new clothes over the old ones so that we can build upon our character and deeds of the past year and continue to develop in positive ways. Other times, it takes discarding the old ones and starting anew to build up a legacy for ourselves which will be passed on from one generation to the next. Sometimes it is Return and Renew, other times it is Repeal and Replace.

To what should we aspire? What should our goal be as we look towards this coming year? I would like to suggest that it can be put into one Yiddish phrase, “Zay a Mensch” – “Be a Mensch.” It is an expression that has been repeated in Jewish homes throughout the centuries. It is a goal, a vision, an attribute to which we should aspire. If we are called a Mensch then we have lived up to our G-d given responsibilities on the face of this earth.

The term “Mensch” literally means a “person” or “man”, but it represents a moral ideal for all people, men and women alike. Rabbi Neil Kurshan, in his book *Raising Your Child to be a Mensch*, writes these words, “Menschlichkeit is responsibility fused with compassion, a sense that one’s own personal needs and desires are limited by the needs and desires of other people. A Mensch acts with self-restraint and humility, always sensitive to the feelings and thoughts of others.” In short, a Mensch is a decent, responsible, caring person. Rabbi Kurshan continues his definition towards the end of his book stating, “The quality of Menschlichkeit is so fundamental to a person’s character that decency and fairness are a part of everything that he or she does. It is a basic orientation to life, a way of being in the world, a way of living before G-d.” In Jewish tradition there is no greater attribute than to be called a “Mensch,” both while we are living and after we are gone.

Guy Kawasaki is an American marketing specialist, author, and Silicon Valley Venture Capitalist. He was one of the Apple employees originally responsible for marketing their Macintosh computer line in 1984. He has gone on to teach people how to be leaders in their industries and in life. In a short You Tube video on Stanford eCorner, on October 24, 2004, Kawasaki states that there are certain qualities that he believes entrepreneurs, and everyone else, should have. One of those is to be a “Mensch.” He states: “Mensch is a Yiddish word to describe a person who is much admired, who is trusted, whose word is sought, whose opinion is sought, who is, sort of like a saint, except to you do not need to be dead to be a Mensch. There is no higher praise for a person than to be a Mensch.”

He then goes on to discuss what he calls “The elements of Menschdom” as he outlines three principles which are easy to enunciate and yet not so simple to put into action.

The first, is that a “Mensch helps people who cannot help them.” Rabbi Lawrence Kushner tells a story of one of his rabbinic students, Shifra Penzias, whose great-aunt Sussie had been riding in a city bus in Munich when SS Storm Troopers suddenly stopped the coach and began examining the identification papers of the passengers. As the officers moved from row to row, Sussie began to get agitated. She began to tremble, tears streaming down her face, when a man next to her noticed that she was crying. He politely asked why. “I don’t have the papers you have. I am a Jew. They are going to take me.” The man began to explode with disgust. “I can’t stand being near you! Can’t you remember anything?” The SS men asked what all the yelling was about. The man shouted angrily, “My wife has forgotten her papers again. I am so fed up! She always does this!” The soldiers laughed and moved on. The rabbinical student said that his great-aunt Sussie never saw the man again. She never even knew his name. This is an example of Kawasaki’s first rule: A Mensch helps people who cannot help them. The man on the bus not only saved Sussie’s life, but also those who would be her descendants yet to be born. In his quick thinking, he saved an entire family.

The second element in being a Mensch, according to Kawasaki, is “to do the right thing, the right way.” After selling a majority stake in Miami-based City National Bancshares in November, 2008, Leonard Abess, Jr. took \$60 million of the proceeds, out of his own pocket, and handed it to his tellers, bookkeepers, clerks, and everyone on the payroll. All 399 workers on the staff received bonuses, and he even tracked down 72 former employees so they could share in the windfall. Abess didn’t publicize what he had done. He didn’t even show up at the bank to bask in his employees’ gratitude on the day the bonus envelopes were distributed. Only later, was he inundated with letters of gratitude.

He was asked what motivated him. He responded that he had long dreamed of a way to reward employees. He had been thinking of creating an employee stock option plan before he decided to sell the bank. “Those people who joined with me and stayed with me at the bank with no promise of equity - I always thought someday I am going to surprise them. I sure as heck don’t need the money,” he said. The Spanish bank Caja Madrid had paid \$927 million for an 83% stake in the business.

Sharing the wealth with staffers came naturally for Abess and his wife, Jayne. They had long been contributors to local organizations including the Greater Miami Jewish Federation, Mount Sinai Medical Center, and the University of Miami. He accomplished the second item on Kawasaki’s manifesto – he did the right thing, the right way. According to a newspaper article in *The Guardian*, in February 2009, he mused, “I wonder if I did enough?”

The third element in being a Mensch, according to Kawasaki, is “the desire to pay back society.” In August 2010, forty of America’s wealthiest individuals and couples joined together in a commitment to give more than half of their wealth away. Created by Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffet, the “Giving Pledge” came to life following a series of conversations with philanthropists around the world about how they could collectively set a new standard of generosity among the ultra-wealthy. It is really a simple concept: An open invitation for

billionaires, or those who would be if not for their giving, to publically dedicate the majority of their wealth to philanthropy. One of its aims over time is to help shift the social norms of philanthropy toward giving more, giving sooner, and giving smarter.

Today, the Pledge includes 170 of the world's wealthiest individuals, couples, and families, ranging in age from their thirties to their nineties representing 21 countries. People who have joined the Pledge are united by a shared commitment to learning and giving, and they have opportunities to gather throughout the year to learn from experts about how to best leverage their philanthropy to address some of the world's biggest challenges.

While we might think that these individuals have not in any way diminished their standard of living, we must acknowledge that they don't have to do this. They could have held onto their wealth or passed it on as an inheritance to their descendants. Yet, they have recognized that you have a moral obligation to pay back society. As Muhammed Ali stated, "The service you do for others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth."

Bruna Martinuzzi, author of *The Leader as a Mensch: Become the Kind of Person Others Want to Follow*, defines a Mensch in this manner: "A Mensch is an individual who is decent and honorable in all his undertakings - he or she is the same person privately and publically. This is a person of high integrity, someone that you would feel totally comfortable doing business with. A Mensch's word is as good as his signature. One of the hallmarks of a Mensch is empathy and compassion, a genuine caring for his fellow man. A Mensch will always look for an opportunity to do good in life, to be of help to the community. When you are in the presence of a Mensch you feel good about you – you sense a total absence of artifice, you know that you are in the presence of a genuine human being, one who will not deceive you, undermine you or try to diminish you in any way."

The question we must ask ourselves tonight is whether we can live up to Kawasaki's standards and Martinuzzi's definition. Can we abide by Rabbi Kurshan's vision of living the kind of life that allows us to be labeled a Mensch? The good news is while some Menschen are born, others gain that nomenclature over time. According to Martinuzzi, all of us have within ourselves the capacity to act as Menschen – it's a part of being human, "We just need to raise our awareness of how we show up in our dealings with others and ask ourselves, 'Am I proud of who I am or who I have become as a person? Do I strive to do the right thing?'"

Howard Jonas, founder and CEO of IDT Corporation, an American telecommunications company with a major office in Jerusalem, in a chapter entitled *But Will Good Character Pay My Bills?*, in a book *Be a Mensch*, writes that success in business is a result of a combination of many factors, most of which can't be controlled. "Talent and luck, for example, are G-d given," he writes, yet, "good character, which is at least is essential, if not more so, to founding and running a major company, can be developed. Persistence, courage, patience, empathy, loyalty, honesty, integrity, kindness, generosity, the ability to cooperate with others – these can all be worked on and cultivated."

In short, we can all become Menschen if we want to be so. We can all be judged compassionate, generous, and kind human beings if we make the effort to live by those

standards. If we follow this path, then by our example, we set the bar high for the generations that follow us who will, hopefully, learn from our legacy and strive to be Menschen as well.

Rabbi Israel of Rizhin once asked a student how many sections there were in the Shulchan Arukh, the Code of Jewish Law. The student replied, “Four.” “What,” asked the Rizhiner, “do you know about the fifth section?” But there is no fifth section,” said the student. “There is,” said the Rizhiner. “It says: always treat a person like a Mensch.”

On the eve of the school year in Israel, beginning September 1, Yehuda Schlessinger, in the Hebrew paper *Yisrael HaYom* wrote a letter to his son Lior as he entered first grade. He said to Lior that he will learn a great deal in school. He hoped he would be a good student and also learn proper values. At the end of his letter to his son, he writes, “As you begin your path to the university of life, I hope that you will gain in addition to book learning the standard of being a Mensch, an upright young man filled with proper values.”

I would suggest that should be our goal for this year, as well, “Zay a Mensch” – be a Mensch.” Work to better yourself in your family, in your business dealings, in your relationships with others. Be humble yet confident, persistent yet flexible, and live up to the high standards set by our Jewish heritage each day of your life. If we do so then we may earn the title of “Mensch” both in our lifetime and after we are gone.

May that be our personal goal, standard, and vision for 5778.