

YOM KIPPUR 5776
THE COURAGE TO COMMIT
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

On October 8 of this year, Houston journalist Kate Murphy wrote an article entitled *What Selfie Sticks Really Tell Us About Ourselves*. She writes that selfies, taking a picture of ourselves with our smartphone, “are a form of expression that may reveal more than the taker intended, no matter how flattering the filter used. Much of the research on selfies reveals that people who take a lot of them tend to have narcissistic, psychopathic and Machiavellian personality traits.” She goes on to say that, of course, not everyone who takes a selfie is a psychopath, “but it does imply a high need for self-gratification, particularly if they are posted online for social approval.”

The invention of the selfie-stick, mounting the camera phone on a perspective-enhancing stick, has created some interesting situations. They were forbidden this year at the Coachella music festival and Comic-Con. They are also forbidden in Disneyland. One can be arrested for using them in Russia, where the government has recently begun a public awareness campaign against the danger of taking selfies, after a series of fatal accidents resulting from self-portraits in precarious poses – like in front of oncoming trains.

In her article she comments: “The basic need to be acknowledged, or even adored, is perhaps why so many have become their own Hollywood directors, attaching cameras to sticks and sometimes drones to enhance the production value of their lives. The recent selfie-stick bans have been interpreted by some who study the selfie phenomenon as more a cultural movement in favor of authenticity and self-possession than the elimination of an annoyance or possible safety threat.”

In other words, a selfie allows us to be the central focus of the camera and to create an identity in which we are the center of attention. We live in the world of social media – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs, and so many others I am not even familiar with. There is so much material that is shared by us or about us by others. It may be easy, we think, to hide behind a screen, to have friends but no real relationships, to share our lives constantly with others but not have meaningful and close association with those individuals. Frankly, I often wonder why some people spend so much time, energy, and money on these types of innovations.

On Rosh Hashana, basing myself on John F. Kennedy’s book *Profiles in Courage*, we discussed the courage to change. It takes inner strength and fortitude to do a thorough examination of oneself, as called for on the High Holy Days, and then have the courage to change behavior, attitudes, and ideas. Today, I would like to discuss with you the courage to commit to someone or some cause, to look beyond ourselves and our individual needs. In the age of the selfie, we need to learn that there is a world beyond us and we need to interact with it.

David Brooks, in his book *The Road to Character* writes: “We have seen a broad shift from a culture of humility to the culture of what you might call the Big Me, from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe.” He cites a Gallup Organization poll taken in 1950 which asked high school seniors if they considered themselves to be a very important person. At

that point, 12% said yes. The same question was asked in 2005, and this time it was 80%. Psychologists, in administering what they call the narcissism test have noticed that young people today have a greater appreciation of their self-importance than those of generations past. Along with this phenomenon Brooks delineates a tremendous increase in the desire for fame.

What is missing, he suggests, in our generation is the humble path. “Humility is the awareness that there’s a lot you don’t know and that a lot of what you think you know is distorted or wrong,” he writes. Humility leads to wisdom and to becoming more grounded human beings. It also, I believe, leads to an ability to see the world beyond yourself knowing that while the world needs you, you also need it.

Brooks suggests that in this age of the selfie, we have become more materialistic as we live in a more individualist society. He writes, “If you humbly believe that you are not individually strong enough to defeat your own weaknesses, then you know you must be dependent on redemptive assistance from outside. But if you proudly believe the truest answers can be found in the real you, the voice inside, then you are less likely to become engaged with others.”

He suggests that there has been a steady decline in intimacy. It is much more difficult for people today to know that there is joy in a life filled with interdependence with others, in a life filled with gratitude, reverence, and admiration. Delineating a 15 point humility code, Brooks suggests that we must learn that we are flawed creatures and that humility is the greatest virtue. Once we appreciate that truth we can move beyond ourselves and begin to appreciate others.

Brooks raises some very significant issue for us. Do we have the courage to put others into our world, to move out of the main frame and allow others to join us in the picture? Do we have the courage to create meaningful relationships with others, to commit to those relationships, and to recognize that we need to trust others to assist us along life’s journey.

Psychologists today have recognized that people have a fear of commitment. Some of them have been termed these people “commitment-phobes.” The term is usually used to describe a person who seems chronically unable to decide whether to commit properly to a relationship. What might be behind that fear? For some it is a fear of rejection by others or a dread that something might be lost in committing to another human being. For others it is an inability to make major decisions which can be binding. The results of this condition are that these people very often are unable to care about another human being, to take the gamble of trying to establish a relationship with another, to experience intimacy with others.

It takes courage to commit to another human being and allow yourself to be vulnerable, to recognize that there is a chance that you could be rejected. It takes courage to offer friendship to another or to commit to a love relationship knowing that your expectations are not necessarily those of another. It takes courage because you can’t predict the future and you don’t know how another human being is going to react to your overtures. Unfortunately, I believe, that lack of courage makes it difficult for individuals to see beyond themselves. It is easier to be part of the selfie generation than to commit to another person and allow them to be part of your life.

David Brooks writes that there is joy in the feeling of acceptance by others, in the knowledge that though you don't deserve their love, others do love you; they have admitted you into their lives. In order to do so, you sometimes have to take the gamble of committing to another person. It may be easier to live in the world of the selfies, but it is not beneficial to you or to society at-large. We need the courage to look beyond ourselves, to care about others, and have others care about us.

If it is becoming difficult to commit to another person, after all, if the world is all about us what need we be concerned about a greater purpose in life, then I think it is becoming even more difficult to commit to a cause. And no cause is greater for the Jewish people as we begin the year 5776 than the safety and security of the State of Israel and its citizens. In a book entitled *Making David into Goliath - How the World Turned Against Israel*, Joshua Muravchik, a Fellow at the Foreign Policy Institute at the John Hopkins University, attempts to analyze why Israel used to be the darling of the West and now is seen as an anathema. Why is it that today, Yom Kippur 5776, the 42nd anniversary of the Yom Kippur war, Israel is no longer thought highly of by so many people throughout the world? Muravchik suggests that in Israel's early years the country was seen as "David." Today, it has become "Goliath." What is it that has happened that has created this change and what does it mean for us today?

Muravchik suggests that there has been a change in the world's perception of the Jewish state. At one time, Israel's story of a pioneering spirit and victory against all odds created a show of support and admiration from many nations around the world. While the Arab states were always against the establishment of the Jewish state, the West and even the Soviet Union voted for the partition agreement in November 1947 to create a Jewish state. Over time the views of the Soviet Union changed as Israel's socialism did not lead it into the Communist orbit. However, Israel became, especially after 1967, the darling of the West.

Today, this is no longer the case. Israel is singled out like no other country around the world as oppressing the rights of others. It is condemned on a regular basis by the United Nations, the Human Rights Council, the International Court of Justice, and by many groups who used to be supporters of the state and its cause. As an example, in 2013 the UN General Assembly adopted a total of 21 resolutions singling out Israel for criticism and four resolutions for the rest of the world combined.

Muravchik suggests that there has been a change over the years as the world has embraced the Palestinian cause, as the power of oil has become a weapon to be used against Israel and its supporters, as European socialists have moved from supporters to opponents of Israel's policies, and as terrorism has reared its ugly head against the countries of the West.

To me, the turning point was November 10, 1975 as the United Nations adopted a resolution stating that Zionism is racism. By a vote of 72 in favor, 35 against, and 32 abstaining, the United Nations, the global arena of the world determined that "Zionism is a force of racism and racial discrimination."

I had never thought of myself as a racist, but in 1975 I was branded as such. As a proud Zionist the nations of the world claimed that my support for the legitimate rights for my people to have their own state labeled me a racist. We are still seeing the residue of that decision, whether it be in Geneva, Durbin, Iran, or the United Nations General Assembly. Israel is singled out, unlike every other nation in the world, for special enmity, hatred and intolerance.

I recall, in 1975, the then UN Ambassador of the State of Israel, Chaim Herzog, gave a resounding speech and tore up the resolution in front of the entire General Assembly. Herzog scorned the many “countries whose regimes practice racism, incorporate racism in their laws and their daily practices” daring to judge his “small free democratic country,” when they themselves were so flawed. “We are a small people with a long and proud history. We have lived through much in our history,” Herzog insisted. “We shall survive this shameful exhibition.” He then literally shouted “We shall never forget.”

In a book written by my friend Gil Troy entitled *Moynihan’s Moment*, Gil portrays the great courage of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the American UN Ambassador, who stood before the United Nations General Assembly and insisted that this resolution was not only uncalled for, but was a crime in and of itself. Before the world Moynihan declared that “Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination” is a lie, a lie which the United Nations has declared to be a truth. Moynihan stated that “whatever else Zionism may be it is not and cannot be a ‘form of racism.’ In logic, the State of Israel could be, or could become, many things theoretically, including many undesirable things, but it could not be and could not become racist unless it ceased to be Zionist.”

Despite Herzog’s impassioned speech, and Moynihan’s great courage, the UN passed the vote. While on December 16, 1991, the United Nations revoked that resolution by a vote of 111 in favor, 25 against, and 13 abstaining, I believe the damage had already been done. Allowing Zionism and the State of Israel to be branded as racist created the environment that changed Israel from being sympathetic “David” to becoming overbearing “Goliath” and has allowed it to be singled out for unfair criticism.

Now we must be clear that it is permissible to criticize the government of the State of Israel and its policies. However, it is not permissible to deny Israel’s right to exist, to de-legitimize the Jewish state, to demonize its leaders, to desire to wipe Israel off the face of the map, or to envision a one-state solution with a Palestinian right of return which does away with the reality of a Jewish state. I believe it takes courage to stand up for the State of Israel against all the odds that seem to be against it at this point in history, and no place is it more important than on the college campus.

In its *Campus Trends Report* published last August, the Israel on Campus Coalition found that the 2014-2015 school years on campus was a year for anti-Israel activity. It found 1,630 documented events critical of Israel at 181 colleges nationwide. Fifty-four campuses experienced BDS, boycott divestment and sanctions campaigns, against Israel, and only against Israel, compared with only 19 the previous year. Natan Sharansky, the Chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency, recently wrote that “today, nearly every American campus is awash in double standards, efforts to de-legitimize the Jewish state and rhetoric demonizing

Israel.” I am pleased to report that there were a record number of 3,753 pro-Israel events and that the students and many faculty members stood up to this wave of anti-Israel sentiment which has spread across these college campuses. However, it has become difficult for our students on campus to stand up for Israel and to show their pride in the Jewish state. While they, too, can be critical of Israel’s policies and leadership, Israel’s legitimacy to survive must be supported by all.

While the BDS Movement has, so far, largely failed to have a major economic effect on Israel, the most pressing concern is that today’s colleges will produce tomorrow’s leaders and opinion shapers and alter public perceptions. Therefore, the 2014-2015 annual assessment of the Jewish People Policy Institute issued last week offered this warning: “the threat lies in the general erosion of Israel’s very legitimacy in the U.S., which could spread to the wider public opinion through constant demonization and vilification, which has become more acceptable in the mainstream. Thus, in another generation, critical American support for Israel could lessen considerably.”

I believe that this battle is only beginning. It will take money, but more so it will take education. While Israel advocacy is important, Israel education is critical. Without the knowledge of Israel’s history, the need for a Jewish state, the constant battle that Israel and its citizens have had to endure for all of its 67 years, it is easier to sit on the sidelines and not engage with others. Without the knowledge that Israel is the only state in the entire region that is a full democracy, that women’s rights and gay rights are preserved in legislation, that the Arabs who are citizens are allowed to vote, serve in the Knesset and on the Supreme Court, our students are not given the tools to be able to fight back against those who profess BDS. They must know that Israel is a country with an army unit that has its bags packed ready to fly to any disaster in the world. Setting up a field hospital in Nepal after this spring’s earthquake or saving lives in Haiti, a 16-hour flight away, after the earthquake there 5 years ago, is part of the Israeli ethic. They should understand the Israelis have revived a land that was partly uninhabitable 150 years ago; revived a language; have beaten the drought; and transitioned from the land of Jaffa oranges to the land of high-tech.

We must ensure that they participate in Israel trips to see the country and talk with its citizens. We must supply our college students with the knowledge and the support so that they can stand up to these great battles and show the courage that is necessary to commit to the cause that we hold so dear. This is a battle that we must win because it is just and right.

And that same responsibility falls upon our shoulders as well. We must stand up for Israel’s legitimate rights on social media, in the press, among our business associates, and in the community. If we sit on the sidelines, then we are guilty of watching these frightful events unfold before our very eyes, and Israel, which used to be the world’s darling will become even more an endangered state. Yes, it takes courage to commit to the cause of the survival of the Jewish state and the Jewish people. But if we don’t do it we can’t expect anyone else to do it for us.

As individuals, we might feel we cannot make a difference. But united, we can protect and defend Jewish lives, customs and traditions, rights, and future. We must raise our voices to speak out for Israel, protect Jews everywhere from the growing threats from terrorists in the

Middle East and Iran, and fight back against the violent resurgence in anti-Semitic attacks in Europe.

The American poet, Maya Angelou wrote: “courage is the most important of all virtues, because without courage you can’t practice any other virtue consistently. You can practice any virtue erratically, but nothing consistently without courage.” We need that courage today to stand up for our people and our state. In our liturgy on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur we say of G-d “oz beyadcha u’gevurah beyminecha” which I want to translate as “courage and strength are in Your hands.” We are to emulate G-d and therefore it is that courage and strength that we need at this time in history to stand up for the State of Israel and Jews everywhere.

In the forward to John F. Kennedy’s book *Profiles in Courage*, his brother, Robert, quotes Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century Scottish philosopher, who wrote, “The courage we desire and prize is not the courage to die decently but to live manfully.” And, John F. Kennedy, himself, in his final chapter writes that “the courage of life is often a less dramatic spectacle than the courage of a final moment; but it is no less a magnificent mixture of triumph and tragedy.”

These quotes remind us that each of us must live courageous lives. If we do so we can truly make a difference in our own small way and cast a giant shadow for others. When we reach out to share ourselves with others in friendship and in love and stand up with pride and strength for the Jewish people around the world and the safety and security for the State of Israel, then it can be said of us that our lives are “profiles in courage.”

On this Yom Kippur day 5776, I pray that we be granted the “oz” and the “gevurah”, the courage and the strength, to make a difference in the lives of others and in the future of the Jewish people.