

Sermon for Yom Kippur
October 4-5, 2022 – 10 Tishri, 5783
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
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A Call For Decency

It was bottom of the first, two out, runners on first and second. Texas East was leading Oklahoma 3-2 in the Southwest Region Championship of the Little League World Series. The winner of the game would advance to the final tournament in storied Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

Twelve year-old Isaiah Jarvis from Tulsa took his stance in the batter's box, the count 0-2. Pitcher Kaiden Shelton from Pearland, Texas wound up to deliver a fastball, and then ...

The ball tailed high and tight and caught Isaiah on the tip of his helmet up by his left-ear. The helmet flew off, and Isaiah crumpled to the dirt, holding his head in his hands. A collective gasp went up through the crowd. After a few minutes, Isaiah stood up, dusted himself off, gathered himself, and walked down to first base. He stood there on the bag for a moment, looking over at the pitcher, then tossed his helmet to the side and walked over to the pitcher's mound.

Kaiden was just standing there on the mound, alone, hanging his head, weeping. Isaiah walked over and embraced him – “Hey, you're doing great,” he told him. “Let's go. I'm ok. I'm fine.” After a minute, as the East Texas team gathered on the pitcher's mound, Isaiah returned to first base, Kaiden dried his eyes and walked off the mound, too overcome to continue. A new pitcher came in and the game resumed. East Texas went on to win 9-4.

“If I was in that position and just hit a kid in the head ... I would be (crying), too,” Isaiah said. “So I was just going over to make sure that he knows I'm OK and he doesn't need to be crying because I'm just fine.”

Why does this story touch us so deeply? Why would this powerfully humane interaction between two young men touch us so deeply? I think because in our day and age, it's so rare.

“You think about our world and how divisive things tend to become,” said Tulsa coach Sean Kouplen. “Here are teams that they all desperately want to go to Williamsport; they are all representing their state; they are competing at the highest level, but they put their friendship and caring for each other above that every time. It is just so refreshing and so inspiring.”¹

For us as Jews, we look at Isaiah and Kayden and we think to ourselves: “What a mensch!” Is there a greater compliment a Jew can give?

¹ “Tulsa's Isaiah Jarvis gets hit in head by pitch, then hugs distraught pitcher who did it in touching display of sportsmanship” by John Tranchina Tulsaworld.com - Aug 12, 2022

According to Leo Rosten's *The Joys of Yiddish*, a mensch is "someone to admire and emulate, someone of noble character. The key to being 'a real mensch' is nothing less than character, rectitude, dignity, a sense of what is right, responsible, decorous."² To boil it down to one word, to be a mensch is to be one thing: decent.

A decent person is someone who honors the humanity of those they encounter in life – the people with whom they live and work, the people they encounter in fleeting moments of meeting, and the people they may never meet, but whom they know will experience the consequences of their actions.

Kaiden Shelton is a mensch – instead of thinking about himself all he could think about was Isaiah, and the fact that he might have really hurt him. Isaiah is a mensch – instead of nursing resentment or anger at having been beamed in the head, all he could think about was Kaiden, and wanting to assuage his fear and his guilt.

Their story touches us because our society seems to be descending ever deeper into indecency. In our fractured society with our deepening divisions, our discourse is ever more snarky and arrogant and coarse. With a month to go before the elections, we brace ourselves for the torrent of attack ads where truth will be turned into pretzels in order to debase, demean, and demonize, and dehumanize a political opponent as a dangerous enemy. Students on college campuses shout down speakers and cancel faculty and fellow students with whom they disagree.

More and more, on television and social media, in politics, in business, in our schools and our neighborhoods, we see an inexorable rise in selfishness, egotism, callousness, cynicism and greed - the relentless pursuit of advantage and power at any cost.

We are losing our capacity for care and love and empathy. We are losing our commitment to civility, honesty, and integrity. We are losing our sense of decency, and it's tearing our society apart.

Our tradition celebrates decency because of a fundamental truth we have tried to teach for thousands of years – that every human being is holy - worthy of consideration, honor, and respect. In the first chapter of the book of Genesis we read: “וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה וַיִּבְרָא אֱדָם - And God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness.” (Genesis 1:26) Created in God's image, a human life is sacred, of ultimate and infinite worth.

What makes humanity holy? First, we have the capacity to cultivate gratitude, appreciation, and wonder, to think about the larger meaning and purpose of our existence – to assign worth to something because of its symbolic or sentimental value. Second, we have the capacity to make deliberate moral decisions – we put our faith in values and principles by which we make a moral or ethical choice. Third, we have the capacity to work toward greater and greater perfection, to recognize our flaws, to repent, and so reorient our compass to change the course of our lives.

² Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1968, p. 240.

But what really makes us human is the power to exercise self-restraint, to follow a path of righteousness because we know it to be right, no matter how tempting it may be to stray from that path. And it is that capacity for self-restraint that ultimately makes us holy.

The very first example of sin comes from the book of Genesis. The serpent tempts Eve, and “when the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate.” (Genesis 3:6). Even when we see something we want, that looks good and tempting and delicious, what makes us human is our power to exercise self-restraint, to do what God asks even if it doesn’t make sense. In the midrashic commentary Sifre to Leviticus Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah says: “From where is it derived that a man should not say: I do not desire to wear *sha’atnez*, (mixing wool and linen together); I do not desire to eat the flesh of a pig; I do not desire to have illicit sexual relations? I do desire it, but what can I do? My God in heaven has decreed against it!”³

In Hebrew, marriage is called Kiddushin – holy things, because when we get married we say, “sure there are other people out there. There are people I might find very attractive, but I won’t act on that urge, because I made a vow, and I will not forsake that vow.

In the sixteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that at the beginning of time, God’s presence occupied all space. But then God was overwhelmed with love and so decided to make a world. In order for the world to come into being, God had to create a space for the world in the universe. So God performed an act of *Tzimtzum* – of self-contraction.

That’s the essence of holiness and decency - the willingness to diminish our own self to make room for the full authentic presence of the other. To say, sure I want to have that – I want to do that – but I won’t, because it’s wrong.

The Torah portion we read from the book of Leviticus tomorrow/this afternoon amplifies that thought: “:אַל־תִּקְיָם:” – You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy.” (Leviticus 19:2)

What makes God holy is God’s willingness to make room for us in the cosmos. And so for us to be holy, we must be willing to commit to the same discipline of self-restraint.

For example, the Torah commands that when we harvest our fields, we do not reap all the way to the edges, and we leave whatever falls on the ground, so that the poor and the stranger can provide for themselves.

Think about what it took to cultivate a field in the rocky soil of ancient Israel, before modern machinery or drip irrigation. Think of all the backbreaking work necessary just to bring a crop to harvest. And now, the Torah commands that we hold back from reaping the reward of all that hard work, so that those who did no work to cultivate that crop can benefit from our labor?

Why doesn’t the Torah just tell us to harvest the whole crop and put a bin next to your house with a sign: “Poor people and strangers – come and take!” Because the

³ Sifre Kedoshim 9:12

unharvested crops at the edges offered a wall of privacy for those who would come to gather what they needed, and offered the most vulnerable the dignity of providing for themselves with their own effort.

Isabel Wilkerson in her book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* suggests that what is required of us is to develop what she calls “radical empathy.” “Empathy,” she writes, “is not sympathy. Sympathy is looking across at someone and feeling sorrow, often in times of loss. Empathy is not pity. Pity is looking down from above and feeling a distant sadness for another in their misfortune. Empathy is commonly viewed as putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and imagining how you would feel. That could be seen as a start, but that is little more than role-playing, and it is not enough in the ruptured world we live in. Radical empathy, on the other hand, means putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another’s experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. Radical empathy is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it.”⁴

The book of Leviticus expresses it in one phrase: “וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ – You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18) And later in the same chapter, the Torah commands: “The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Leviticus 19:34). My teacher Dr. Elana Stein Hain asks a poignant question: why do we need the commandment to love the stranger if the Torah already commands us to love our neighbors? Isn’t the stranger included in the category of ‘our neighbor’? The reason, she suggests, is that the first commandment – “וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ – You shall love your neighbor as yourself” requires us to love those who are כְּמוֹךָ – who are “like you.” But later we are told we also need to be told to love the stranger “הוּא לֹא כְמוֹךָ – who is NOT like you.”

Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit in his remarkable book *The Decent Society* notes that, “A decent society is one whose institutions do not humiliate people... that accords respect ... to the people under its authority.”⁵ A decent society does not treat its members as objects or pawns. A decent society preserves the freedom of every citizen to make decisions concerning their vital interests, to have control over their bodies, to be free to make decisions that bear on their lives. A decent society is one that preserves the right for each person to make their own moral judgments, and does not infantilize or rob its members of their liberty or dignity.⁶

We don’t just dehumanize each other when we demonize each other. We dehumanize each other when we remain indifferent and ignore each other. How often do we look right through the people we encounter throughout our day, the people that serve us in stores and restaurants, the homeless people holding cardboard signs at an intersection, the people who perform back-breaking work fixing our roadways, or mowing our lawns? How

⁴ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. New York: Random House, 2020, p. 386.

⁵ Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society*. Translated by Naomi Goldblum. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 1-5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 116-119.

dehumanized do we feel when we sit forever in line or on hold, when we wait for hours in an office only to be rushed through our appointment, when because of our age, or our gender, or our race our voices are silenced and our opinions ignored?⁷

What would our society look like if we could learn, consciously and conscientiously, to look at each person we encounter and see that individual as the most precious human being on the planet? What would our society look like if we all practiced radical empathy? What would our society look like if we could learn to be champions for decency?

In the Talmud, we are taught: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. [Beit Shammai] said: The law should be followed in accordance with our opinion, and [Beit Hillel] said: The law should be followed in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a *Bat-Kol* – a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: *Elu V'Elu Divrei Elohim Chayim* - Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.

The Gemara asks: Since both are the words of the living God, why does the *Halakha* follow Beit Hillel? The reason is that the students of Hillel were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the *halakha* they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai.⁸

What's amazing about this teaching is that the law doesn't follow Hillel because his followers were smarter or more discerning. The law follows Hillel because his followers were more decent. Amazingly, God cares more that we follow the path that is decent than the path that is right.

If we truly want to secure the kind of society God has asked us to build, we must start this New Year by renouncing the selfishness, egotism, cynicism and greed - the relentless pursuit of power and advantage that is destroying the foundations of our society. Instead, we must shore up those foundations with kindness, understanding, radical empathy and human decency. We don't just need decent leaders to build a holy society, though we do – we need to be decent people ourselves. In this New Year 5783, we need to humanize our discourse, humanize our institutions, and humanize our relationships, to walk from the safety of our bases and embrace one another with decency and love.

That is what it will take for each of us to be a mensch.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 100-103.

⁸ Talmud Eruvin 13b