

YK 5772 9/11
“A Little Lower Than Angels”

Shabbat Shalom. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah.*

A month ago, members of our shul and other faith communities gathered on the Lexington Battle Green to mark the ten-year anniversary of 9-11.

The service was moving as we read prayers, sang together, and heard reflections about the events of that day. At the end of the service, we lit candles and shared with each other at a reception in front of Hancock Church.

A couple of weeks later, we had the opportunity to reflect again on 9-11 just before our annual joint Emunah-Isaiah *Selihot* service. At that program, we screened a film entitled “The Power of Forgiveness.” It is a provocative documentary about communities and people forgiving terrible things that were done to them.

It opens with the Amish forgiving the man who murdered five of their daughters. It moves to Elie Wiesel in the year 2000 telling the German government that it is time for them to ask for forgiveness from the Jewish people – which they then do.

It continues with the story of three women who lost sons or husbands on 9-11. They struggle with the issue of forgiveness and with letting go. They try to let go of these most terrible events and the fact that they do not have bodies to bury, since their loved ones were incinerated in those incomprehensible collapses.

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How can we make sense of the events of 9-11?

The events of 9-11 are so massive that they are hard to relate to on almost any level. This year, I took an hour for myself on 9-11 to remember alone: I read the published transcripts of the final conversations that occurred between those who were in the towers on the floors above the crashes and their loved ones. Alone in my office, sitting at my computer, I read those final messages – and wept.

But beyond all the fascination and all the remembering, we must look for glimmers of hope. We must look for the humanity that still exists in the world.

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A *Hasidic* teacher, Rabbi Bunam taught that we should always have two stones in our pockets. One should be engraved with the words “*Ani afar va'eifer* – I am nothing but dust and ashes.” The second one should be inscribed: “*B'shvili nivra haolam* – for my sake the world was created.”

And we should use each stone as we need it.

Judaism teaches that as humans, we should inhabit the space between these two ideas. We must have the humility of one who realizes that we were created from dust and, ultimately, return to dust.

Knowing so much about the vastness of the cosmos, we can appreciate how small we are in this almost infinite universe. That should help us keep our egos in check.

The Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgies echo with this theme during the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer: “Man’s origin is dust and his end is dust. He spends his life earning bread. He is like a clay vessel, easily broken, like withering grass, a fading flower, a passing shadow, a fugitive cloud, a fleeting breeze, scattering dust, a vanishing dream.”

On the other hand, too much humility and we dissolve into insignificance, powerless. We cannot forget Hillel’s famous teaching: “*Im ein ani li, mi li* – If I am not for myself, who will be for me? Of course, Hillel tempers this and adds, “If I am only for myself, what am I?”

We must believe in the goodness we all possess, aware that we all have gifts that we bring into this world. In that sense, the world was created for each of us. Human beings are the pinnacle of all creation and can conceive of their own existence and of God’s.

A life lived in between these two world-views, in between these two mottoes, is a meaningful life.

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Let’s examine the words on each of these stones. “*Ani afar Va’efer* – I am really nothing. That’s pretty self-explanatory.

I am a little uncomfortable about the wording on the second stone. While the intention is clear – that all of us are created in God’s image and thus possess infinite worth, it can be misread. “*Bshvili nivra haolam* – for me the world was created” is dangerous because one might construe it as: “I am the center of the Universe.”

So, let me suggest a slightly different formulation from the book of Psalms. “*Va’t’hasreihu m’at me’Elohim* – You have made each person a little lower than the angels.” (8:6)

The Psalmist states it beautifully: we truly are just a shade below those perfect divine creatures: the angels. When we live our lives truly connected to others, guided by

a sense of morality, we aspire to the upper strata, almost reaching the heights occupied by God's heavenly court, just a little lower than the angels.

Yom Kippur is often construed as a time for seeing ourselves as dust and ashes, but it is also a day when we act out our aspiration to be only a little lower than the angels. Gathered here dressed in white, fasting, praying – emulating the angels, we are in a position to consider the scope of our greatest potential. Without knowing what we CAN achieve, we may not set our sights high enough. How do we become a little lower than angels?

Inspired by a path connected to God through the rituals, prayers, and beliefs of our Judaism, we can live a life of *kedushah*, of holiness; we can become more sensitive to all in God's world – God's children, God's creatures, God's lands, God's waters.

Every so often, we learn of people who beautifully integrate these sensitivities into their lives. From their stories we discover that humans can truly become but little lower than the angels.

Just as I was taken back to the terrible events of ten years ago, we all have been repeatedly taken back to September 11, 2001. Those events have again and again impelled us to admit that humans have a capacity for violence and depravity, for corrupting God's message. We know that as humans we are sometimes “nothing but dust and ashes.”

But we must also hold onto the vision of ourselves as a little lower than the angels. There are moments in all of our lives when we behave more like angels. Perhaps these moments occurred decades ago or perhaps just yesterday.

Although September 11th's horrors were perpetrated by people acting like “nothing but dust and ashes;” even on that infamous day, there were others who were close to angels.

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Abraham Zelmanowitz was one of them. An employee of Blue Cross and Blue Shield on the 27th floor of the north tower, he refused to leave behind his friend and co-worker of many years, Edward Beyea, who could not descend the stairs because he was confined to a wheelchair.

The *NY Times* reported that Evelyn Zelmanowitz said that she spoke to her brother-in-law by phone soon after the plane plowed into the tower. He told Mr. Beyea's nurse's aide to leave the building, since she had children to think of.

“He was very calm,” she said.

“He said the air was clear and that they were waiting for a medical team to help evacuate his friend. That was the last we heard from him.” His body was finally found months later, and he was buried in Jerusalem.

As his world is crumbling around him, he reached out to a friend. Imagine those moments of deciding to wait for a rescue that never happened. Imagine the compassion, the love, and the gratitude that was shared during their last moments of life.

A terrible and tragic to be sure, but also a beautiful departure from this earthly abode. ...

But maybe this story is not so unexpected. These people knew each other; they had a strong bond.

Let me share with you another story from 9/11. “My name is Usman Farman,” the young man wrote. “I graduated from Bentley with a Finance degree. I am Pakistani and I am a Muslim. Until September 11, 2001, I worked at the World Trade Center... I have friends and acquaintances (who also work there). [Many were] (some remain) buried under the rubble.” ...

He continued: “We were evacuated to the north side of Building #7, still only a block from the towers. (We were told) to go north and not to look back. Five city blocks later, I stopped and turned around to watch. With a thousand people staring, we saw in shock as the first tower collapsed...

The next thing I remember is that a dark cloud of glass and debris about 50 stories high came tumbling toward us... I turned around and ran as fast as possible and I fell down trying to get away... I was on my back, facing this massive cloud...

Everything was already dark... I normally wear a pendant around my neck inscribed with an Arabic prayer for safety. (While I was on the ground, with people stampeding past me) a *Hasidic* Jewish man came up to me and held the pendant in his hand and looked at it for a brief moment. [...]

What he said next, I will never forget. With a deep Brooklyn accent, he said, “Brother, if you don’t mind, there is a cloud of glass coming at us, grab my hand, and let’s get the hell out of here.” He helped me stand up and we ran for what seemed like forever without looking back.

He was the last person I would ever have thought would help me. If it weren’t for him, I probably would have been engulfed in shattered glass and debris.”

What an unexpected rescue for this Pakistani man. A *Hasidic* Jew saving a devout Pakistani Muslim. A story that confounds our stereotypes.

In the midst of a day of horror, we do not expect angelic behavior, but sure enough, we find it. From the heroes of flight 93 to the firefighters to the police officers, from the little acts of loving kindness to the great ones, that day is now synonymous not only with evil, but also with acts of *hesed* - loving kindness, *rahamim* - compassion, of *kiddush haShem*, the sanctification of God's name.

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But sometimes we think there should be love or angelic behavior, but we cannot find it. An example of this occurred in the middle of the 17th century to one of my ancestors, the *Tosfos Yomtov*, who was the chief rabbi of Cracow from 1643 until 1654. The chief rabbi was responsible not only for adjudicating legal matters, teaching and writing, but he was also in charge of many communal activities. He had to ensure that every Jew was fed and cared for. This required quite a bit of fundraising. Without all the Jews in Cracow contributing their fair share, or even more than that, the community could not sustain itself.

As is still the case today, around Yom Kippur, an extraordinary effort was made to raise the needed funds. (Perhaps this is the origin of the Kol Nidrei Appeal?)

In any case, times were difficult and the funds they needed were simply not there. After days of asking, the *Tosfos Yomtov* came to the house of a very wealthy Jewish businessman named Yossele. When a servant opened the door and he saw all the silver, the *Tosfos Yomtov* knew that here he could count on a large donation.

After speaking informally for a few minutes, he made his pitch and eagerly awaited the positive reply. But none came. Yossele, the wealthy Jew simply shook his head and said "I cannot give anything."

The *Tosfos Yomtov* was flabbergasted. How could this be? Perhaps the man had had a bad year. The following year, he tried again. Still no success. And year after year, Yossele never donated any *tzedekah*.

Since times were difficult, the *Tosfos Yomtov* decided to make an example of Yossele. He put him into *herem*, excommunicated from the rest of the community because of his miserliness. And upon his death, he would be buried apart from the community in the back of the cemetery. ...

And so it was, when Yossele died he was buried in a remote corner of the cemetery.

But a few days after Yossele's death, strange things started to happen. Poor people started to come up to the *Tosfos Yomtov* asking for funds for *Shabbes* food, asking for money to buy clothes. The *Tosfos Yomtov* asked why they needed money all of a sudden and they stated that every Friday before *Shabbes*, someone would drop off *hallah*,

wine, and chicken for Friday night dinner and now it no longer came. Story after story, they were all the same.

It was then that the *Tosfos Yomtov* realized that Yossele had been supporting the community all along. But he went to great lengths to give the *tzedekah* anonymously, a particularly meritorious way to make a donation. He did not want anyone to know who was giving the money. Indeed, no one ever knew until after his death, despite all the abuse that he suffered. Yossele would secretly give the money to local merchants, who in turn, gave food, clothing and money to the poor.

But this beautiful story does not end here with Yossele who was a little lower than the angels. After the *Tosfos Yomtov* realized what he had done, how he embarrassed Yossele in this world and in the next realm by having him buried at the back of the cemetery, he was visibly shaken and immediately began the serious process of *teshuvah*, of repentance. He prayed to God; he asked the man's descendants to forgive him and went to the man's grave with a *minyán* of ten others to ask for *selihah*, forgiveness.

But beyond all that, he declared that when he died, he would be buried next to Yossele. And so it was.

I have been to that cemetery three times. It's behind the famous Rema synagogue in Cracow, named for the great rabbi Moshe Isserles, known as the Rema.

The Rema's grave is in the front of the cemetery, along with other luminaries. But if you hike to the back, make a left and look about eight graves from the corner, you will find the *Tosfos Yomtov's* grave next to Yossele's by the wall, in the section reserved for those Jews who brought no honor to the community or to themselves.

The *Tosfos Yomtov* made a terrible mistake by assuming that there was no greatness in a man whose behavior had actually been exemplary, angelic. And then, he performed an act of *tikkun*, he tried to repair the damage he did. ...

Perhaps in that cemetery, the message is that those buried in all the graves – those in the front and those in the last row – are all a little lower than the angels.

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I have shared two stories about great acts on a day that will long live in infamy and a story about a great man whose memory has already endured as a blessing for four centuries. Most of us will not be long remembered in history. And we all hope not to experience another day of infamy.

So, where do we fit in?

Perhaps we can perform random acts of kindness. There's something remarkable in people that leads them to perform these seemingly "random" acts of kindness; it is an

innate inclination to act nobly. Concerned about others we should try to be ready to meet the challenges which may present themselves, to transcend our normal behavior – to fulfill our potential, to act, but little lower than the angels.

Here is a story about the empathy of a nameless man for a nameless woman. The man, who, at least, in this instance, was but a little lower than the angels, recounts it.

“Twenty years ago, I drove a cab for a living. Once I arrived at 2:30 a.m. at a dark building, except for a single light in a ground floor window.

Under these circumstances, many drivers would just honk once or twice, wait a minute, and then drive away. But, I had seen too many impoverished people who depended on taxis as their only means of transportation. Unless a situation smelled of danger, I always went to the door . . .

So I walked to the door and knocked. “Just a minute,” answered a frail, elderly voice. I could hear something being dragged across the floor. After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 80’s stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like somebody out of a 1940’s movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase. The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years.

“Would you carry my bag out to the car?” she said.

I took the suitcase to the cab, and then returned to assist the woman. She took my arm and we walked slowly toward the curb. She kept thanking me for my kindness. “It’s nothing,” I told her. “I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother to be treated.” “Oh, you’re such a good boy,” she said.

When we got in the cab, she gave me an address, then asked, “Could you drive through downtown?” “It’s not the shortest way,” I answered quickly.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she said. “I’m in no hurry. I’m on my way to a hospice.” I looked in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were glistening. “I don’t have any family left,” she continued. “The doctor says I don’t have very long.”

I quietly reached over and shut off the meter. “What route would you like me to take?” I asked.

For the next two hours, we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds. She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl. Sometimes she’d ask me to slow in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing.

As the first hint the sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, “I’m tired. Let’s go now.” We drove in silence to the address she had given me.

[Upon arriving] I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair. “How much do I owe you?” she asked, reaching into her purse. “Nothing,” I said. “You have to make a living,” she answered. “There are other passengers,” I responded. Almost without thinking, I bent down and gave her a hug. She held onto me tightly. “You gave an old woman a little moment of joy,” she said. “Thank you.”

I squeezed her hand, then walked into the dim morning light. Behind me, a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life. I didn’t pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly, lost in thought. For the rest of that day, I could hardly talk. What if that woman had gotten an angry driver, or one who was impatient to end his shift? What if I had refused to take the run, or had honked once, and then driven away?

On a quick review, I don’t think that I have done anything more important in my life. We’re conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments. But great moments often catch us unaware – beautifully wrapped in what others may consider a small one.

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With all the challenges this time presents us – we are still fighting two wars, Israel’s predicament, our economic malaise, political fights that have halted effective national government, let us not forget those, who in moments fraught with peril or filled with the commonplace, rise above the limitations of our human body to emulate the Almighty – living as God’s angels, acting justly, loving compassion and walking humbly with God.

Shabbat Shalom. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah*. May we all be sealed for a good year.