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What Courage Looks Like

L'shanah tovah.

It is, as always, sweet and uplifting to be here with you.

We've been together for over two years now. Two years getting to know each other, learning and praying, together at the most important moments in our lives.

We are doing our best to fulfill our community's mission of strong Jewish identity, meaningful observance, creativity, spirituality and generosity. It is never perfect, but the qualities of kindness and forgiveness are alive and well in our community, and for that I am very grateful.

It has been a joyful, meaningful year for my wife Sarah, for our kids Elie and Mica, and for me. Thank you for your trust, your openness, and your partnership.

I prepare for Rosh Hashanah throughout much of the year.

I keep a journal with notes, thoughts, and questions; reactions to events around the world, and reflections on our own lives.

About midsummer I begin to review my notes.

I try to learn and discover, the best I can, the themes and questions that feel the most immediately alive for us.

Sometimes they are clear; other times less so.

As I reviewed my notes this summer, one question consistently emerged, connecting some very honest conversations we have had as a community with a broader, even national, dialogue that has challenged and pained us this year:

What does it mean to act with courage? Do we even know what courage looks like?

The question crystallized as a national dialogue in an unexpected context.

Each spring, a prominent national journal gives an award to a person who has made a significant, compelling humanitarian contribution to the world. This past spring, the journal nominated a woman who had spent many years of her life hiding her personal identity, and who had, at last, transitioned her gender.

The nomination was both celebrated and drew harsh critique. One particular response became symbolic of a national struggle.

A Facebook user posted a picture of two men in military uniforms, one carrying the other over his shoulder away from danger. Beneath the picture, he wrote: “just thought I’d remind all of us what real American courage, heroism, and bravery looks like!”

In less than a day, his post had been shared and liked close to half a million times. It became a fierce public debate.

An essential question of our time was playing out in the context of this humanitarian award:

What does courage look like? What is its image?

Does it look like physical bravery, rooted in service to country and friendship, in loyalty and the willingness to live one’s life in the context of a greater, often national, mission and purpose?

Does it look like an existential struggle to be authentic, to live with dignity and integrity? To face others with vulnerability? To trust that others will come to accept you in the face of culturally dominant impressions of what's normative?

Of course it's not an either/or proposition. Both cases exemplify the best of the human spirit. All those staking a claim to courage had made great personal sacrifices, yet felt unacknowledged, unheard, even intentionally hidden. They shared more than they knew.

Still, this question - what does courage look like? - seems to be pressing urgently against us every single day. We are struggling to know how and when to hide or reveal our personal identities. We are confronting issues of race and racism that force us to ask hard, honest questions about our history and ourselves that shape, even define, us - and the generations that will follow. We are facing issues of long-term security and peace that require our leaders - and us - to make decisions on some of the hardest questions we have had to ask in many years.

Does courage look like swift, strong response to the potential for conflict?

Does it look like patience and restraint?

Does it look like confrontation, arising out of the experience of prejudice and pain?

Does it look like resiliency, expressed with prayer and hope?

In 1957, then Junior Senator John F. Kennedy wrote a book called *Profiles in Courage*, a volume of short biographies of eight United States Senators throughout the Senate's history. The book, which went on to win the Pulitzer Prize, tells the stories of senators who defied the opinions of their parties and constituents to do what they felt was right.

Even the stories of the senators profiled in the book give us far more questions than answers.

As one example, among those profiled was Senator Robert A. Taft from Ohio.

As you know, after World War II, twenty-two political and military criminals of the Nazi party who carried out or participated in The Holocaust and other war crimes were prosecuted in Nuremberg, Germany.

Senator Taft condemned the Trials. He claimed they compromised international standards of justice in favor of a politicized version of justice.

In a famous speech, Taft stood before a conference on the Responsibility of English-Speaking Peoples and exclaimed, “About this whole judgment there is the spirit of vengeance, and vengeance is seldom justice. The hanging of the eleven men convicted will be a blot on the American record, which we shall long regret.”

Due in large part to his opposition to the Trials, he lost the nomination for President.

Due in large part to his opposition to the Trials, he was commended and celebrated for taking a principled stand in the face of bipartisan criticism.

Was this the face of courage?

Or was it Primo Levi, who, while the Nuremberg Trials were unfolding, wrote what may be his fiercest poem, first called Psalm, later retitled, “Shema.” With vengeful tones and the words of prayer, he wrote:

I commend these words to you.

Engrave them on your hearts

When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,

When you go to bed, when you rise.

v'sbinantam livanecha

Repeat them to your children.

Or may your house crumble,

Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

He demanded testimony as a reminder of the horrors of the Shoah and he called down shame and disease on those who would silence that testimony. His response to the Trials was to give his own testimony of Nazi persecution and genocide; he did so with the torment and integrity of poetry and prose.

Though not in direct conflict, Senator Taft and Primo Levi's responses challenge us to ask: what was the face of courage in that moment of shared history?

And, learning from it, what is the face or courage in our own?

A recent op-ed in the New York Times suggested: "We find it easier... to admire physical bravery than moral courage... It's hard for us to see [our leaders]... as courageous... Perhaps we have seen too much, grown too cynical about the inevitable compromises of power. There are no Gandhis, no Lincolns anymore. One man's hero... is another's villain. We no longer easily agree on what it means to be good, or principled, or brave. When... leaders do take courageous steps, there are as many who doubt as approve... courage, nowadays, is almost always ambiguous.

[Salmon Rushdie, NYTimes, "Whither Moral Courage," April 27, 2013]

And yet - just at that moment of confusion or frustration - we witness an act of courage so unexpected, moving and clear, its grace penetrates our souls.

The morning after the violence and terror at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, a presiding elder in the Church, the Reverend Norvel Goff Sr., gave a rousing sermon.

"I want you to know," he spoke through tears, "the doors of Mother Emanuel are open..."

His voice roaring now, the Reverend went on: "Some wanted to divide the races - black and white and brown - but no weapon formed against us shall prosper."

The Reverend's prayer spilled into the streets. Nicknamed the Holy City, with steeples as its skyline, Charleston was covered in banners. One read: "Holy City...Let Us Be the Example of Love..."

A faith-based community steeped in the prophetic tradition, the Reverend's message and the city's banners echoed the words of Isaiah, whose message of courage is the foundation of Jewish social justice activism: "God shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people [so that they] beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: lo yisa goy el goy cherev- lo yil'medu od milchma. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:3-4.)

Yes, there are times and circumstances when we know what courage looks like.

But living with courage is not just a broad, communal challenge.

It is a profoundly personal one.

Alongside the biographies of the senators in JFK's Profiles in Courage are his own reflections on the quality of courage. "In whatever area in life one may meet the challenges of courage," he wrote, "whatever may be the sacrifices he faces if he follows his conscience... each man must decide for himself the course he will follow. The stories of past courage can define that ingredient - they can teach, they can offer hope, they can provide inspiration. But they cannot supply courage itself. For this, each [person] must look into his own soul." [p. 266].

Kennedy reminds us that even as stories inspire and teach us, our personal courage does not come from external sources. The source of courage is held, embedded, and carried in the depths of our being.

Discovering the source is our work this sacred time of year.

Asking forgiveness, accepting our own and others' failures and flaws and being willing to love anyway - it's all about courage. Courage is the heart of teshuvah, the source of renewal and repentance.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, known as Rav Kook, was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-Israel Palestine, one of this last century's greatest, most influential and most celebrated Jewish teachers, mystics, and Talmudic scholars.

In his book, *The Moral Principles*, he writes about the personal qualities that we must cultivate to lift us up towards a higher spiritual realm.

Among the most essential is courage. "A person must be trained in courage and firmness of heart and only then will he be fit to embrace God."

Drawing on a mystical image of the universe as made up of broken shards of light, Rav Kook writes: frightening thoughts and images are just fragmented colors, but when those colors come together, they engender confidence and strength that fill the soul with courage.

I love Rav Kook's image. It is a great reminder: contained within the soul that is courageous are multitudes of fragments, countless feelings and images of fear.

This image came to life for me in the story of a boy named Earnest. I know of Earnest because he grew up at The Spurwink School in Portland Maine, a mental health agency for children with severe mental, emotional and behavioral health challenges and developmental disabilities. My parents were the first teachers at Spurwink fifty years ago.

By the age of two, Earnest had been profoundly abused by his mother, and removed from her care. At Spurwink, Earnest lived out the trauma and shattered experience of childhood abuse in the context of a rigorously loving, supportive and tough environment of children, most struggling to heal or simply survive the experience of having been fractured, ruptured and thrown away.

For everyone involved - children, their families of origin, foster families, social workers, psychologists, teachers, organizational leaders - life at Spurwink was both as painful and as redemptive as it gets. Every day, they lived out a relentless paradox: defeated by the severity of the suffering; and hopeful, holding on for dear life to a moment of connection or shared understanding.

Ten years after he first came to Spurwink, Earnest asked my father to accompany him to the mental health hospital where Earnest's mother now lived with acute, debilitating psychosis. The entire ride there, Earnest's body shook.

Together they went to her room. Earnest stood immediately in front of her.

"Mom, my name is Earnest."

"You're my mother. I'm your son."

"I love you.

But I will never see you again"

His mother, suffering, was unable to respond.

Earnest walked out of the room, and drove home together with my father. They didn't talk.

We might imagine that courage means prevailing, or looks like triumph.

"Mom, look at you now," Earnest might have said.

But the source of spiritual courage is not impenetrable strength, but sheer, sometimes numbing, vulnerability. Standing in front of the one who hurt you, or whom you hurt. Revealing your truth. Asserting agency and dignity.

And, as in Earnest's case, somehow expressing the compassion that, through it all, you still may feel.

In his honesty and in his fear, Earnest exemplified courage.

How do we find courage in the depth of our own souls? On this point, Judaism is clear: we have to encounter, through prayer and ritual, what we fear: most poignantly on our High Holy Days, the knowledge that our lives are so fragile. We don't know who will live and who will die. Who in their time; and who not in their time.

What we're asked to do on these days of teshuvah, is stand in complete humility, authenticity and fear, before God. This stance is where personal, moral, and spiritual courage is found.

The truth is, we have been courageous. We do know what it feels like. We may not have shifted the winds of change but we have done ok:

we have supported and influenced families and children; we have taken care of parents as they have aged; we have helped patients heal; we have represented those seeking justice; we have sought forgiveness from people we have hurt; we have rehabilitated from pain; we have responded to debilitating illness with integrity and grace.

And yet, that courage can still feel so evasive.

How often we feel stuck in patterns of thought or behavior that we can't seem to break out of, unable to see past the perceptions that currently frame our lives.

We need these days of teshuvah to help us ask:

can we be courageous?

can we accept our failings and flaws - and those of others - and decide to love anyway?

can we be honest with our spouse or partner?

can we set a vision for our life's work and pursue it?

can we ask for forgiveness, and forgive generously?

can we step back and out of a relationship when necessary, for our safety and care?

As a community of friends, are we going to be courageous?

will we strengthen our observance and seek wisdom in the spiritual life of mitzvot?

will we be creative and imaginative enough to envision and integrate change, as our ancient tradition demands that we do?

As a congregation among others, are we ready to be courageous?

because this world needs us.

will we offer our compassion, our insight, and our companionship to communities in need?

will we partner with spiritual communities towards the project of repairing our world?

will we assure others, Jewish and non-Jewish, that we will support them, particularly during painful times?

As we seek to live with courage in a time when its image is not always clear,

may we be genuine, even as it means showing our fears or weaknesses to others

may we trust that we will be met with acceptance and loving care; and

may we be resilient, loyal and true.

This is our work this coming year.

Chazak chazak v'nitchazek, may we be strong, bold, and courageous.

The new year is upon us. This is Day One. Let's begin.

L'shanah tovah.