

**Kol Nidre**  
**High Holy Days 2017/5778**  
**Becoming a Mensch**  
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**September 30, 2017 10 Tishri 5778**

Sometimes, the most important lessons come from painful learning.

Not long ago, I got triggered. Now I know that none of you ever get triggered but well, I do. The details are not important now, though the meta-issues are very important. I'll get to them later. Anyway, in short, there were some emails back and forth. I said something and then someone said something back, and zap!--something very tender inside me got touched. I felt embarrassed, even humiliated, and because it happened over email with a lot of people on the thread, I felt very exposed. I responded like a wounded animal, trying to protect my bruised ego. As soon as I hit the send button I regretted it.

And then I spent the next week suffering, beating myself up for having responded so reactively. I should have known better.

In the week following the incident, I realized that in fact, I had been wrong. It was hard to be honest and admit this—even just to myself. But once I did, I was able to see some of my own blind spots—things that I really needed to see.

When we get triggered, we often react—without thinking. That reaction is likely a remnant of our animal nature. When an animal feels threatened, or is under attack, it will fight back. If it senses that its very existence is threatened, it will fight with everything it has.

When we humans feel threatened or under attack, we too often bring out every weapon at our disposal. Sharp words, words with poison darts attached, words that fly on bows and arrows that are aimed straight at the heart, dealing what we hope might be an emotional mortal blow—bringing our opponent down to the ground, with us standing proudly over our victim, our own wounded pride vindicated. Sometimes we humans bring out far worse: real weapons, from small handguns to . . . . well, potentially, nuclear weapons.

When we get triggered, we can set in motion a cycle that is difficult to break. We do and say things that we may later regret.

Since this incident happened, I've been trying to slow down the cycle, enough to pay attention to the rapid cascade of emotions as they occur.

If only some of our political leaders could learn to pay greater attention when *they* get triggered.

We are living in a time of great, maybe even unprecedented reactivity. It was bad enough when we could lash out on email before we took a moment to breathe or think twice before hitting the send button. Now we can launch 140 character missives (or perhaps better missiles) at any time throughout the day—even in the wee hours of the morning—without stopping to think of the potential consequences.

Friends, something is really, really wrong.

Somehow, I think, we've lost the art of diplomacy—which the dictionary defines as tact and skill in dealing with people.

I've chosen to speak about this tonight, this evening of Yom Kippur because well . . . in some ways I think that our very survival as a species depends upon it. Certainly, at the international level, I think it's obvious what I am talking about, as we watch in disbelief as certain leaders sling phrases such as “fire and fury” and taming “the mentally deranged U.S. dotard with fire.”

And at the personal level? I truly believe that both our individual health—physical, emotional, and psychological—as well as our collective well-being depend on our learning to interact with one another differently. We can keep getting triggered or triggering others and then be left to clean up the consequences—intended or unintended . Or we can learn diplomacy--the art of interacting with other human beings with greater tact and skill--in other words, acting in a more civilized way. Maybe being diplomatic—acting with tact and skill--is one facet of the Jewish concept of *menschlekeit*—the quality of being a mensch, an honorable human being.

Maybe if we did learn more about what *menschlekeit* entails, then rather than aspiring to become the person with the most followers on Facebook or Twitter, or the one whose new start-up gets sold to Google or Facebook for billions of dollars, we and our children and our grandchildren might aspire to become *mensches* in the world. What a wonderful thought.

When you think of the word *mensch*, does someone in particular come to mind? What were or are that person's qualities? Was that person born a *mensch*, or did he or she have to consciously work at being more *menschlekeit* in his or her behavior or demeanor?

The Yiddish word *mensch*, a gender neutral term, is related to the German Mensch, meaning a "human being."

But the Yiddish *mensch* means much more than just any ordinary human being; it is "a person of integrity and honor," an honorable human being, a noble person.

*Mentshlehkeyt* refers to the qualities that make a person a "*mensch*."

Some of us may have learned what it means to be a *mensch* through explicit lessons from our parents, our teachers, or others in the community. Others of us may have learned more implicitly about being *mensch*es simply by observing others whom we admired.

The fact is there is much more for ***all of us*** to learn.

And fortunately for us, there are many resources within our Jewish treasure chest that can help us do just that.

One of the earliest is a very small book called *Pirke Avot*, Ethics of our Ancestors. It contains the well-known teaching of Rabbi Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?" There are also writings from the early Middle Ages—books such as Duties of the Heart, The Path of the Upright, the Palm Tree of Devora--that explore and guide us to become more honorable human beings. In more recent Jewish history, the writings of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar Movement, along with some of his disciples and fellow teachers have been added to this collection. Mussar study and practice is experiencing a revival in our own generation. These books are truly among Judaism's greatest treasures, but they are mostly unknown in the non-Orthodox world. We are so fortunate that in recent years, a number of new books have been written that make these earlier texts more accessible to all. If you're interested in learning more, I will be offering a year-long program with different levels of participation starting in October. It is for those of us who want to study and practice cultivating greater *menschlekeit* in our lives.

I know that I want to. Who wouldn't?

Well, to be honest, I can understand why some wouldn't. It's hard to admit that we're not perfect, that we have faults and weaknesses that need to be improved upon. It's

hard enough to admit this to oneself; to admit it to others is even more difficult. Looking at ourselves and our behavior requires not only honesty, but also a level of vulnerability, a willingness to say to oneself and to others: I want to do better, to be better as a human being. It also requires time and commitment—yet one more thing to add to our list of things to do. To really look at ourselves, we need a safe and supportive environment, one that will allow us to do the important but hard work of refining the sometimes rough edges of our personalities. In the world of Mussar, these are called our Middot—our personal qualities or characteristics. I know that I have some rough edges. I'm not proud of them.

Perhaps the need for honesty and vulnerability is why one of the primary foundation stones of a life of *menschlekeit* is humility, *anavah*.

Among other things, humility means that we recognize that we are not better than anyone else—regardless of our learning, our work in the world, our lifestyle, our economic status. A beautiful passage in the Talmud illustrates this. It says that

The Sages of Yavneh would customarily recite these words: I am a creature [of the Almighty] and my [unlearned] friend is likewise a creature [of the Almighty]. My work [of Torah study] is in the city, while he toils in the field. I arise early to do my work, and he does likewise. Just as he is not presumptuous concerning my work, so shall I not be presumptuous regarding his work. And if you will say that I do much [of Torah study] while he does only a little, [and I am, therefore, more praiseworthy than he, it is not so, for] we have learned (Menachot 11b) “An individual who does more and one who does less are both alike, providing that the individual's intent is sincerely for the sake of Heaven.” (Berachot 17a).

Humility also means that we recognize that who we are, or what we have achieved, is not all the result of our own doing. In the Book of Deuteronomy we read,

“When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget your G-d the Source of All . . . and you say to yourselves, ‘My

own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.’  
Remember that it is your G-d, the Source of All who gives you the power to  
get wealth . . . ” (8:12-17).

In other words, our fortunes, our blessings come from G-d, the ultimate Source of  
our creativity, our intellect, our skills, our very life.

Another quality of *menchlekeit* is looking kindly or favorably upon another person,  
and not judging that person harshly or unfairly. After all, we do not know all of the  
circumstances that lead a person to be or act a certain way. And so *Pirke Avot* teaches us:  
“Do not judge your friend until you arrive at his circumstances” (Avot 2:4). It also teaches  
us that we should give everyone the benefit of the doubt; if given a choice, judge them on  
the side of merit. (“Heveh dan et kol ha’adam l’chaf zechut” --Pirke Avot 2:10).

One of my favorite qualities of *menschlekeit* is “receiv[ing] every person with [*panim  
yafot*]--a pleasant demeanor or cheerful countenance” as it says in *Pirke Avot* 1:15. I really  
believe there is something to this. It is not simply that we have to always put on a happy  
face, or pretend to feel something that we do not. I think this quality teaches us the  
importance of making a human connection with each person, to look them in the eye and to  
convey, not just through words but through our demeanor, “You matter to me.” At a time  
when so many are completely fixated on their cell phones, greeting others with a cheerful  
countenance is one small but simple expression of our shared humanity.

There are many other qualities that reflect *menschlekeit* behavior: being patient,  
slow to anger, being gracious, treating others with kindness, having a generosity of spirit.  
And more.

Learning about and refining these qualities or *middot* does not have to require a  
huge time commitment; we can practice throughout our day, every time we come in contact  
with another human being. Will we let ourselves get triggered, or can we strive to respond  
with graciousness and kindness?

Being honorable human beings. What more could we aspire to? What more should  
we aspire to? If ever there were a time that honorable human beings were needed to help  
set the world back on the right course, that time is now.

Which leads me to the meta-issue that I mentioned earlier, and the most important lesson I learned several months ago that time I got triggered.

This lesson is best exemplified by another teaching from Pirke Avot (2:6): “*B’makom sh’eyn anashim, hishtadel l’hiot ish.*” “In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man.” (Avot 2:6). Though written in a male-dominated world in which men were the primary players, this is not, I am sure, a statement about gender. It is a statement about acting like *mensch*es even when, especially when others around us are not. We might also translate it, “In a place where no one is being human, strive to be a human being.” It is applicable to all of us, equally.

Friends, in these extraordinarily challenging times, it is up to us to be *mensch*es, honorable, ethical, and noble human beings, in our treatment of others—including the undocumented immigrants who fled to this country seeking safety and a better life for themselves and for their children, just as our grandparents and great grandparents did when they came here. It is up to us to be honorable, ethical, and noble human beings in our efforts to confront the continued racism and oppression of people of color in this country, to look honestly and courageously not only at the biases and prejudices around us, but also, at those within us—those that are built on our own privileged positions in the world—as hard and as painful as that might be. It is up to us to be honorable, ethical, and noble human beings, in our interactions with one another—here in our own congregation and community, when we are online, when we go to the grocery store or have to wait in line at the post office. It is up to us to be *mensch*es--in places and circumstances where too many are forgetting what it means to be human—at least the kind of humans we are capable of being—if only we would reach a little higher.

Friends, I hope that we can do this important work together in the coming year. For if not now, then when?