

It's About Us: Courage

Ariel Sharon, Nelson Mandela, Pete Seeger, Robin Williams.

Each of them left us between last Yom Kippur and this.

Each of them was praised, lionized really, when they died.

**Sharon saved a country--at least once on the battlefield and
it can be argued, once more as Prime Minister.**

Mandela gave birth to a country.

And did so peacefully, while much of the world expected a bloodbath.

Pete Seeger challenged a country—

to become more than it was, and it became.

Robin Williams, entertained a country—and as a wise jester,

showed how ridiculous prejudice and small mindedness could be.

It seemed that everyone praised them when they passed.

But while they lived, their journeys were far from easy.

**Controversy, accusation, persecution and inner turmoil
all took their pounds of flesh.**

We praise the dead not only because it's polite, but also because "why not?"

They can't rock any more boats. They've lost their power.

Their enemies finally have them where they want them.

So fine, why not pile on with the nice words?

**People of action, truth tellers, people who keep us off balance,
people who strike fear in people in high places
rarely have an easy passage through life.**

For one thing, people in high places strike back.

And while it's nice to be vindicated in death,

to accomplish something in life,

requires what we call in Hebrew *ometz lev*—grit, courage.

All of our heroes, living and dead, pretty much by definition, have courage.

**It's a good thing they do because let's admit it,
not all the rest of us do.**

For many human beings the path of least resistance is the favored one.

We understand that not everyone can be a hero,

that not everyone is willing to pay a price for sticking out his neck.

But a life without courage is not really a life at all.

If we don't stand for something, we'll stand for anything.

If we put up with everything, we'll accomplish nothing.

Part of the message on Yom Kippur is that's no way to live.

We don't have to be a Sharon or Mandela to live with courage.

**A young woman on my staff came back from summer vacation one year
and told me how she went zip lining and bungee jumping**

in the rainforest.

Then she asked me the scariest thing I had ever done.

That was easy I told her: get married and have children.

A few years later, when she got engaged

she said she remembered that.

It does take courage.

To make marriage and family work, we need lots of it.

As we do to apply for a new job, make a big move,

even to say hello to a stranger.

(Right now, turn to someone you don't know, tell him/her your name and wish one another *shana tovah*. Took a little courage, right?)

We also need it in the wider world.

But there too, so often we take the path of least resistance.

For example, many of us prefer to have our opinions confirmed rather than challenged.

It's why we have our favorite news sources, commentators, networks and websites.

We'd rather be comfortable listening to echoes of our own thoughts than expend the courage it takes to listen to different ones.

I admit, I do this too. I try not to overdo it but in a complex, dangerous and uncertain world, let's face it, we want reassurance.

All the more so when things are difficult.

As we all know this was a summer of horror: rocket attacks, civilian casualties, tanks in the suburbs, nine year olds with automatic weapons, renewed anti-Semitism, renewed war...

No need to go on.

Even the Keys Jewish Community Center, in the all but undisclosed location of Tavernier, Florida, saw fit to beef up its security profile this year. And go no.

More than anything else, we want to feel safe.

In our persons and in our thoughts.

Courage? We leave that to the professionals.

That's not always the best response.

On the High Holydays in particular we are supposed to identify and confront our personal shortcomings.

And that takes courage.

It takes much less, none at all really, to identify someone else's.

Not only is it easier--if we can denigrate, discredit or even demonize them, it absolves us. Hmmm.

This kind of behavior goes back a long way.

The first recorded incident is from Adam regarding Eve.

Adam tells God, in as many words,

"I know you said not to eat it but she gave it to me."

i.e. it's her fault. Of course it is.
 Eve is no longer around, but we still find people to blame.
 The conservatives, the liberals;
 the immigrants; the blacks, the gays, the Hispanics;
 the government, the media;
 the Jews, the Christians, the Muslims;
 the 1%, the "takers"; legislators bought and paid for,
 predatory banks, tax dodging corporations;
 Congress, the Courts, the President;
 Pretty much everyone agrees: it's their fault.
 That is not to say sometimes it isn't true, sometimes it is.
 But even when it is, it takes zero courage to say it.

For those of us of a certain age, it's an article of faith that
 the country now is very different from the one in which we grew up.
 The early 1960's may have been the apex of the American empire
 but whenever it was, it isn't now.
 Not coincidentally we are far more polarized today than we were then.
 Then the enemy was the Soviets.
 We could blame them for most anything, and we did.
 But we also cooperated more with one another then.
 Now more than anything we want someone held accountable and
 we are going to find them if it's the last thing we do.

On Yom Kippur, we get a different take on who is responsible.
 And we've already seen it.
 Most of the *machzor* is written in the first person plural: we, us, our.
 The message is that it is about us,
at least, and really more, than it is about them.
 We fast and pray for the next 24 hours to give this radical reorientation
 as much time as we can for it to sink in.

This spring, with one hundred Jewish HS seniors from Miami,
 (and our own Dr. Steven Smith) I visited a number of Nazi death camps.
 Naturally enough, the students wanted to know, "How could people do this?
 "How can human beings slaughter men, women and children,
 in this way, in these numbers?"
 "How can something like this happen?" We've all wondered this.
 I gave them my answer: I didn't know.
 I also told them I didn't want to know.
 Because in order to know I would have to understand.
 And to understand, I would have to put myself
 into the heads, hearts or even hands of the murderers.
 And that is just not a trip I am going to make.
 So I don't know how people can herd other people into gas chambers
 or line them up and start firing machine guns
 or for that matter commit a beheading or a crucifixion and put it on YouTube.
 I don't know how people can do that.

But I believe I do where the trailhead is,
where the road to that kind of behavior begins.

It begins when we identify someone as other.

Any other will do.

We just ran down a whole list of them.

Pick someone you don't like and blame them for
as many of your troubles as you can.

Stay with it until our hard-wired "dislike of the unlike" will kick in.

Keep feeding the frenzy and eventually
people will do whatever you want them to do.

Because it frees and absolves them.

We've seen it time and again through history.

And it's still playing at a theatre near you.

We would so much rather do this than face our own shortcomings.

The *machzor* calls it "*ritzat raglayim l'hara*—
running after a multitude to do evil."

And it takes no courage whatsoever.

It's interesting that in the Torah's first description of the scapegoat ritual,
which we'll read tomorrow morning,
there is no mention of the slaughter of the animal.

Instead of satisfying any of their latent bloodlust
the people sent the goat into the wilderness. (Lev. 16: 10)

And when the goat was gone, whatever frustrations, inadequacies,
problems or failures they harbored, remained.

The ritual seemed designed to teach them that their internal upsets
were not someone else's fault.

They had to own them.

That ritual required no small amount of wisdom—
and no small amount of courage.

You could argue that this is one of the reasons we've survived as a people.

When calamity occurred we asked, what was our role in this?

How could we have done better? Note first person plural.

From that first Yom Kippur until this, our focus is inward.

I am something of an amateur astronomer and I learned this as a youngster
but it struck me when I heard it again this year.

Throughout history people have been afraid of comets.

They were somewhat worried that the comet was going to
shoot out of the sky and hit them.

But they also had a sense that the comet was a sign that
the gods were onto them.

According to Neil DeGrasse Tyson, host of this year's Cosmos series,
it was the people's innate fear and guilt that made them think this way.

To me that was a wow.

What were they feeling guilty about? Innately no less?

Note this all began well before Judaism or Christianity arrived on the scene.

And it continued long after, in Western and non-Western cultures alike. It seems human beings understand, deep within, that we stand guilty before whatever god(s) we stand before.

Whatever our religion, or even if we have no religion, we have a conscience. And we recognize that our lesser nature regularly overcomes our higher one.

Guilt abides. In all of us. And it takes courage to face it.

This by the way is why people will follow to the ends of the earth leaders who tell us that we are all right, and the problems we face are the fault of someone else.

We love it when people take away that innate guilt and offer us, in effect, absolution.

On the other hand, leaders who force us to confront our shortcomings, who ask us to look within and sacrifice, are not nearly as beloved.

It's a game pretty much every leader has learned to play.

And it's a dangerous one.

We've all seen the wrong that a population can do when it believes it can do no wrong.

That is not to say there are no real bad guys or no just battles, there are.

But this side of a just war

as we said on Rosh Hashanah when we spoke of empathy,

it's what in us that matters most.

If our response to the world's frustrations and conflicts is to vent our spleen, if our response is to tell ourselves that so much would be better

if only someone would get rid of those people,

we are not only taking the coward's way out,

the path of least resistance and least courage,

we are also kidding ourselves.

So, *Al Chet* for the sin of arrogant finger pointing. For the sins of scapegoating and fomenting hatred. For the sin of taking power by demonizing and exploiting the powerless. And for the sin of not realizing until it's too late that we've been played in the process.

We should know enough history by now. If we haven't read it, we've lived through it. Organized scapegoating is always for the benefit of someone higher up. We may get the psychic relief that comes from blaming someone else. But as they beat the drums, we give them the power.

In the online world they say if you are not paying for the product, you are the product. In other words those "free" email, social network accounts and internet browsers are anything but free. We get them in exchange for our personal data, which is in turn bought and sold for someone else's benefit and profit. We are the product.

Similarly, the hatred and blame that we think we get for “free” when someone tells us it’s their fault, gives more to whomever is calling the tune than it does to us. So in addition to everything else, blaming the other is a con. We the product. We are the victim. Courage starts to look pretty good in comparison.

When our ancestors sent the scapegoat into the wilderness, they understood it was the beginning, not the end. They were left to face the core questions. What am I doing with my life? What should I be doing with it? And how can I do what I should be doing?

How can I be part of mending, healing, repairing the world? How can I have a peaceable conversation about things that matter with someone who doesn't see things the way I do? How can we reach a place of deeper understanding? How do we stop short of saying, he’s just an “other.”

Judaism makes, if you will, a reverse Copernican shift. When it comes to responsibility for life, we are at the center of the universe.

I believe the good news is as follows. Even more than people want someone to blame, they want someone with whom they can reach a higher understanding. People want to know they can make a difference. Because that is ultimately how we measure the worth of our lives. Give someone an opportunity to do a *mitzvah* that heals, cures, bridges or strengthens, and they will run to do it.

I don’t say this because it is something a rabbi is supposed to say. I say it because it is my life experience. And I know it is the experience of many of us here today. So please, enough about them. It is about us.

Ariel Sharon saved a country.
Nelson Mandela founded a country.
Pete Seeger challenged a country.
Robin Williams awakened a country.

Each one of them had courage. Each one of them had wisdom.

Each one of them knew that at the end of the day it’s about us.

If we can make their example our own,

we will leave here tomorrow night as better persons
than we were when we entered tonight.

Which is why, when all is said and done, we are here in the first place.

G'mar tov and l'shana tovah.