

## IMPERFECT PEOPLE ARE GOOD ENOUGH FOR GOD

Yom Kippur 2014

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Yom Kippur is like no other day in the Jewish calendar, and to the best of my knowledge it has no counterpart in any other religion, with its 24-hour abstention from eating and other physical concerns, with its wide-ranging moods, from guilt to radical self-acceptance, from the very private moments of being asked to examine our consciences to the collective re-enactment of the expiation service as it was performed in ancient Jerusalem in days when the Temple stood. But if we were asked where is the emotional center of the 24 hours of Yom Kippur, I suspect most of us would fasten on the Yizkor service of memorial. On a day when the physical reality is of how many seats are filled, the emotional reality of Yizkor will always center on seats that were once filled but today stand empty, people who were part of our lives – parents, siblings, husbands, wives, children, friends-- and are no longer physically here with us. Whatever else the Mahzor may be about, for most of us, I suspect, it will always lock in on memories of love and loss.

We all bring our memories of love and loss with us to synagogue on Yom Kippur, but there is one family in Newton this morning (evening) for whom

**Yizkor will be especially, perhaps even unbearably painful. Mordecai and Galit Grutman will be trying to come to terms with the death by suicide last February of their 17 year old son Roe.**

**Roe Grutman was one of three bright, promising Newton teenagers who took their own lives this past spring, young people from loving homes who seemed to have so much to live for. I didn't know any one of the three or their families and I hesitate to diagnose someone I never met. How can you understand what would drive a young person with so much to live for to deliberately end his or her own life? But knowing what I do know of the stresses of being 17 or 18 years old in an affluent, status-conscious suburb, it's hard not to suspect that all three of them suffered from the same disease, and the name of that disease is: the fear of not being good enough. Roe Grutman was a junior at Newton South High School. One of the others, Karen Douglas who grew up in Natick, was a senior. I didn't know either of them, but I do know something of the anxiety, born of worry, that affects many young people of that age, whether it's the fear of not getting into the kind of college your parents expect you to or a bad mid-year report card or a failed romantic relationship, the bottom line will inevitably be "what if I'm just not good enough? What kind of life can I have to look forward to?"**

High schools can be cruel places when it comes to separating young people into winners and losers. David Brooks of the New York Times has written “High school is a machine for social sorting. The purpose of high school is to give young people a sense of where they fit into the social structure.” And when the struggle for social acceptance becomes too intense, Brooks goes on to say, schools schedule dormant periods, called classes, during which students can rest their minds and take a break from the pressures of social sorting out. Students correctly understand, though adults appear not to, that (sorting people into winners and losers) is the most important thing they do at school.”

I had a terrible time in high school. It was my introduction to all the ways in which some people are taken more seriously than others and I was one of the others. I received weekly, if not daily, reminders that I was not part of the In crowd.

Then, thirty five years after we graduated, I got a letter from a committee of my former high school classmates, inviting me to be the main speaker at our 35<sup>th</sup> reunion. This was right after *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* had been on the New York Times best seller list for two years. I wrote back and politely declined, telling them I’m sorry but it didn’t fit into my schedule. But what I felt like writing was “Where were you when I needed you, when I was a

shy, awkward 15-year-old and a kind word of recognition from one of you would have meant so much to me?"

But high school is only one example of all the ways in which some people are taken more seriously than others. There is the whole world of internet matchmaking, an activity devoted almost entirely to giving some people the message that they are not good enough. Can you imagine – I suspect many of you can – the humiliation of having someone meet you for thirty seconds and giving you the message “you’re not worth my time.” There is the world of work, whether it’s sales or management, where I sometimes think people work overtime to invent ways of rejecting other people. Is this really the kind of world we want our children to grow up into? No wonder some gifted, sensitive teenagers, even if they don’t do something as drastic as what Roe Grutman or Karen Douglas did, find ways of telling us that this is not a game they are interested in playing.

Suburban parents are caught in a trap. I really believe that a very small part of it is about bragging rights when it comes to college acceptance, like that mythical bumper sticker that reads “my son is a student at Harvard” and then in small print “also accepted at Yale, Cornell and Johns Hopkins.” I would like to think that very few parents are that self-centered, thinking their children’s

successes and failures reflect on them, asking their children to make up for all the things they never got to do. But inevitably, probably unintentionally, they give their children the mixed message, “on the one hand, we’re proud of you just as you are and we want you to end up somewhere where you’ll be comfortable and happy. But at the same time, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for you to get a head start up the ladder of success. And after all we’ve done for you, is it too much to ask you to give us something to brag about when we get together with our friends?”

Again, I would emphasize my hesitancy to analyze the thought processes and emotional feelings of someone I never met, but if the pressure of getting into the best possible college was part of it, I wish someone would have shared with those grieving families Malcolm Gladwell’s recent book David and Goliath, where he brings evidence that people have happier lives and more successful careers if they are A students at a B level college than if they are B students at an A level college. Why would that be the case? Because you will have had the experience of success, of rising to the top, of being really good at what you do, and that confidence will serve you well in looking for a job, in looking for a life partner and in everything you do. You might be better off in the long run, Gladwell insists, going to a college where you will still get a first-rate

**undergraduate education and have a better chance to impress one or more of your instructors as somebody special.**

**But if that were my whole response to the epidemic of people tempted to give up on life for fear that they are just not good enough, it might be a useful talk for a USY meeting but not for a Yom Kippur sermon. I think, though, that the plague that afflicts so many high school students, the fear of not being good enough, afflicts those of us who are well beyond the teen-age years. It attacks us at our jobs, in our roles as husbands and wives, as parents. We compare ourselves to our neighbors, we compare ourselves to people we read about, and too many of us come away with the feeling that we don't measure up. The fear that we are just not good enough has the power to drain much of the joy and much of the enthusiasm from our lives at whatever age we find ourselves, and none of us deserve that.**

**How do you change that? How can you possibly change that? It comes down to the question of what we think life is really about. We have to choose between two paradigms, two metaphors for understanding life and finding a place for ourselves in it. That choice may not make a difference in what happens to us, but it will have a lot to say about how we feel about what happens to us. There are these two possibilities. Do we see life as a competition, a contest**

with winners and losers, in which everyone who doesn't win loses? Do you believe that there is a limited supply of satisfaction in the world, like the limited number of places in a select college, or like a trip to the World Series or the Super Bowl that only two of the thirty-two major league teams will attain and everybody else goes home disappointed, so we have to hustle, even cheat if necessary to get our share before someone else can claim it? Is life, like sports, like politics, a game of winners and losers? In politics, if you get 47% of the votes, you don't get 47% of the decision-making power. At best, you get your name in small print in the history books.

Or is there an alternative paradigm? Can we come to see life not as a competition but as a jigsaw puzzle, where the aim is to help everyone, including ourselves, find the right place for them, for us, so that the final result is something gratifying for everyone and nobody has to go home a loser? That is why – and every educator I know agrees with this statement – the annual USNews survey of the best colleges is a waste of paper published in an effort to sell magazines, because there is no such thing as the best college. It's like trying to identify the best ice cream flavor. What is the perfect college for one young person might be a total mismatch for another. You don't want the *best* college for your eighteen year old son or daughter, you want the *right* college for them,

the one where they will be able to flourish and find out who they are and what they are good at. You don't really want them spending those four years being reminded that they are not as good as most of the people around them. You shouldn't be looking for the best job as determined mostly by the salary level or by some abstract metric created by someone who has never met you. You shouldn't be looking for the best home to live in, even the best marriage partner. You should be looking for the right one, the best one for you even if it may not be the best for everyone.

I think of a man I knew some years ago – I met him after I endorsed a book he wrote. He wrote to me to thank me for the endorsement, and told me that he often found himself in Natick. His former wife and their children lived here. And could we meet for coffee sometime when he was in town. In the course of our getting to know each other, he told me the following story: He and a close friend were teaching English at one of the small colleges that grace the New England landscape. After a few years, they were up for tenure, and they were both denied. That's a way of saying they were fired. His friend refused to accept that, saying all he ever wanted to do in life was teach English at the college level. He appealed for a hearing. He threatened to sue the college. None of that helped. My friend, in contrast, wrote the administration a letter

thanking them for releasing him from a job he was apparently not suited for, and went on to a second career at which he did very well. For him, teaching English was a very good job but it was not the right job.

The paradigm of life as competition rather than cooperation, life as a contest rather than life as a jigsaw puzzle, not only creates many more losers than winners and increases the amount of unhappiness in the world (and who wants that?). It teaches us to see everybody else as a threat to our happiness, as people who want to get more of the limited amount of good things in life so there won't be any left for us. It's a system that leaves even the winners wondering what it is they have won and was it worth all the people they had to push aside to get there.

In Shin Ansky's Yiddish classic, *The Dybbuk*, his drama of the supernatural, the central character is a wealthy man who, for reasons of greed, breaks off his daughter's engagement to his best friend's son, even though the couple is deeply in love and even though the two fathers, when they were boys growing up, swore that if one had a son and the other had a daughter, the two would marry. But now he has gone back on his word so that he can marry his daughter off to a wealthy merchant. The broken-hearted young man, in despair, kills himself and his soul invades the soul of his former fiancée. That is the dybbuk,

the ghost of a person that inhabits another person's body to set right an act of injustice. The girl's father, in desperation, arranges for an exorcism. It's at this point in the drama that a mysterious stranger shows up and engages the girl's father in conversation.

He asks him to look out the window; "what do you see?" The father answers, "I see people." The stranger then takes him to the mirror. "Now what do you see?" "I see myself." "Isn't that interesting?" the stranger asks. "The window is made of glass, and the mirror is made of glass, but the glass in the mirror has had a thin coating of silver added to it. And as soon as the silver enters the picture, people can no longer see anyone else. They only see themselves."

When you see life as a competition for a limited supply of good things, not only is your perspective on other people distorted, not only do you set yourself up to be disappointed most of the time, even as 31 of the 32 major league teams go home disappointed when the season is over. You pay the steep price of teaching yourself to see other people, people you probably have a lot in common with, as obstacles to your happiness, and in the process, you miss out on some of the most gratifying experiences any of us will ever know, the experience of true friendship that is more about giving than getting, the

experience of helping another person deal with his or her life. Can there be any better feeling in all the world than knowing that there is someone out there who is grateful for the fact that somebody like you exists in this world? I will confess that that has been the single most fulfilling aspect of my 55 years as a Rabbi and of my 32 years as a best-selling author, not the fame and not the book sales but the knowledge that I and the religious tradition for which I speak have made some difficult moments more bearable for so many people.

That is why I was so disappointed recently to read the results of a national survey that found 80 percent of American young people rated personal success as more important to them than helping others. That saddened me, that they have already learned to see life as a competition for a limited supply of satisfaction, a sorting out of people into winners and losers, with someone else's good fortune coming at your expense, "that could have and should have been mine," rather than seeing life as an enterprise that we are all in together. The Globe reporter who covered the story tells of asking her 16 year old son if he thought she appreciated his getting good grades in school more than she appreciated his habit of helping his grandmother get up and down the stairs. He replied, "That's a trick question, isn't it? Of course you do."

I remember Dennis Prager, speaking to this congregation some years ago, challenging us, “How often have you praised your children for being smart, for getting good grades? And how often have you praised them for being kind? Yet aren’t both of those equally important Jewish virtues?”

As one educator put it, “Kids today are intuitively caring, but that impulse to care about others is buried by the overwhelming pressure they feel to succeed....If kids are raised to be caring, they will learn to tune into other people’s feelings. They will have better relationships their whole lives. They’ll be better marriage partners, better parents and better friends, and in the long run will likely be happier due to those stronger relationships.”

Our Jewish faith has one more item in its bag of tricks to cure us of the disease of fearing we are not good enough. It’s called Yom Kippur. What is this day all about if not the inevitability of human failure and the assurance of divine forgiveness when we fail, from the opening words that come even before Kol Nidre, anu mattirim l’hitpallel im ha=avaryanim, we reach out to include sinners in our congregation, to the repetition al het she-hattanu, for the sin we have committed, it’s an acknowledgment that all of us are less than perfect and that despite that fact, or perhaps because of that fact, all of us are welcome here. In the privacy of our hearts, during the moments of silent, individual

contemplation of the liturgy, we admit to God “Yes, I messed up a lot of things this past year, things I knew at the time I should have done differently. I let people down, people I genuinely care about. I turned a deaf ear to people in need. All too often, I hid from the truth rather than admit that I was wrong.” And God says to us in reply, “Okay, now tell me something I didn’t know. Of course you did those things, and so did every one of the hundreds of people sitting around you. You did those things, not because you’re a bad person and not because you’re a weak person, but because you’re human. That’s why we have this service every year and that’s why so many people feel the need to be here for it. We welcome imperfect people, people who can be selfish, people who can be thoughtless to the service, because if we didn’t do that, we’d never get a minyan.

Take my word for it: everyone sitting around you has had, and many may still have, those doubts as to whether they are good enough to handle a demanding job at work, good enough to raise a difficult child, good enough to close the gap between them and someone they genuinely care about. This is a service for imperfect people, to give them the feeling of being accepted in the sight of God and to give them the courage to step into a New Year. Ours is a religion for imperfect people, for people who, when we are being honest with

ourselves, can't help wondering if we are good enough to be who we yearn to be. And the prayers of Yom Kippur say to them, "No, of course you're not going to do everything you would like to do, but you will do a lot of what you need to do, and you will do what you are capable of doing.

Still afraid that maybe you're not good enough? If you know that and you're still willing to try, don't be afraid. Yom Kippur would remind us that imperfect people are the only kind of people there are. And if that's good enough for God, it should be good enough for us as well.

L'shanah tovah tikatevu v'techatamu.