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Cheshbon HaNefesh: A Moral Inventory for Ourselves and our Nation

Last night, I spoke about lists – I offered lists of lists, a list of why lists are helpful, and I even shared a list of sermon topics for rabbis.

This morning, I begin with another list. This one is about that proverbial glass; you know that one – is it $\frac{1}{2}$ empty or $\frac{1}{2}$ full? We know that the optimist will see the glass is $\frac{1}{2}$ full; and the pessimist will see the glass is $\frac{1}{2}$ empty.

Now here's my list:

1. The engineer says the glass is two times bigger than it needs to be.
2. The politician says the glass would be much emptier if my opponent was in office.
3. The IT support staff says you should empty the glass and try refilling it.
4. The nutritionist thinks the human body needs much more fluid than that.
5. And the idealist will say that the glass is full, even if it's not.

Now, let me ask: What type of person are you? Do you see your life as half empty? Or half full? Are you proud of your achievements or weighed down by your regrets? And what type of nation do we live in today -- Half empty or half full? Is it bursting with goodness and hope? Or is it crammed with so much conflict and anger that we should throw the glass out altogether and start again?

I recently heard an anecdote about two sisters playing outside in their yard. The girls come running into the house to their parents. The first says: "The garden is a terrible place; it is full of rose bushes covered in thorns." The second sister says, "The garden is a wonderful place; all of the thorn bushes have beautiful roses on them."

Both sisters know that the garden is full – the question is, 'what is it filled with?' And so the ACTUAL answer to the question – is the glass $\frac{1}{2}$ empty or $\frac{1}{2}$ full? – is that the glass is *always* full – it is full of water and air. Think about this: How long can the average person live without water? Perhaps five days. Now think, how long can the average person live without air? Perhaps five minutes. What is sometimes mistaken for nothing might actually be more valuable than what we seem to have.

We are like that glass -- filled with both:

Water and air;
Satisfactions and success;
Discontent and disappointments.
Thorns and roses too.

The Hebrew word for sin, '*avera*,' literally means "missing the mark." Certainly, we have all missed the mark at times when we didn't conduct ourselves as well as we could have. We didn't reach our human potential in a myriad of places in our lives. But there have also been plenty of times that we were on target: making a difference in someone else's world; stretching ourselves to achieve a goal; acting with honesty and compassion. I know for me sometimes it is easier to list the sins than to quantify goodness and blessings and merit in my life.

There is a parable about two businessmen.

The first is wealthy, selling merchandise in great demand. He spends his days stocking his warehouse, completing orders. All the while his pockets are filling up. But he doesn't take the time to keep a careful record of his transactions. The second man is poor: his merchandise doesn't sell. He has little income; he is constantly worrying about whether he will be able to support his family. He has no choice but to maintain a careful accounting of his income and his expenses. A year passes and the first businessman finds himself with a warehouse full of unsold merchandise and no customers. He is now poor and doesn't understand why. Meanwhile, the second businessman continues to review his balance sheet. He benefited greatly from his meticulous bookkeeping. Over time, he is able to earn a substantial living.

What have we learned here?

This parable of the two businessmen is at the beginning of a slim volume written by a rabbi named Menachem Mendel Levin at the beginning of the 19th century. In Hebrew, the book is called Cheshbon HaNefesh, meaning an **inventory of the soul (nefesh)**, which is a traditional practice at this season. Rabbi Levin outlines a step-by-step program, a directory for self-improvement. His words also provide the moral to the story of the two businessmen.

The successful businessman doesn't just tally the income. The successful person lists credits and debits; assets and liabilities. I'm sure the lesson is clear to the many accountants among us.

It is also the lesson of these high holidays: when we follow the instructions of Rabbi Levin we find that the inventory of our souls is not simply a list of sins and transgressions. Like any accounting ledger, our "spiritual portfolio" includes both strengths and weaknesses, triumphs and defeats. It records what is missing in our lives and what we have.

As I suggested last night, lists give us a way to examine and evaluate the world. I quoted Umberto Eco, an Italian novelist and philosopher, when he said that Lists *make infinity comprehensible*.

And so this season guides us to make a ***searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves***.

Rabbi Levin's book is not a list of "bad behaviors" and sins – it is a catalogue of human traits.

As we examine ourselves through the lens of each virtue, we can reflect on how did we did in this area? Not enough? Too much? Or did I act in the right measure? Among the traits on his list are:

1. Patience
2. Order
3. Humility
4. Truth

About 100 years before Rabbi Levin's book was published, a similar list of human virtues was compiled. And while we have been hearing the name, Alexander Hamilton, a lot this season, it was another great statesman, Benjamin Franklin, who designed a behavior chart in his Autobiography. His list includes:

1. Silence
2. Sincerity
3. Justice
4. Tranquility

By selecting just a few of the traits in these two books, we can begin to take an inventory of ourselves:

Did I find **ORDER** in my life – enough to grapple with the mess of existence? But not so much that I became rigid and inflexible?

Was I **PATIENT** with myself and with others? Did I rush to respond too quickly? Or did I sit back and wait too long before I accomplished something?

HUMILITY: was I humble enough to appreciate my place in the world but not so humble as to think too little of myself.

Was there **SILENCE** during my days? Was I quiet enough to listen to others? Was I TOO quiet? Did I speak out for those who are silent /against their own wills?

Completing such an inventory of our souls enables us to consider our human behaviors, flaws and potential, in a structured way. We become empowered to take action -- action we might not have taken if we hadn't looked carefully at the glass on the table in front of us in the first place.

This morning I read the story of the Binding of Isaac in the Torah: In it, Abraham is commanded by God, *"Take your son, your precious one, Isaac, and offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the hills that I will point out to you."* The path up the chosen hill was the journey of a lifetime for father and son. Each individual footstep brought them closer to the moment of truth, the flash of salvation, the ram caught in the thicket.

We too have to take steps, one measure at a time, to understand and appreciate ourselves, to reorient and refocus. Benjamin Franklin and Rabbi Levin knew this too. Both make it clear that

true, effective progress and change are gradual and on-going. Taking the inventory of our souls is just the beginning.

Abraham and Isaac couldn't reach the top of their mountain quickly. And neither can we. Sometimes we don't want to do the work – the thorny, arduous work – of improving ourselves. Wouldn't it be delightful to stumble upon a shortcut up the mountain?

In fact, shortcuts are all around us:

- The diet plan that promises we can Lose 20 Pounds in seven days
- The telemarketer announcing, "You've won a million dollars," just press pound to claim your fortune.
- The financial guru who claims to have 100 Ways to Make a Fast buck
- The email that promises that we will achieve great success – with the purchase of some "secret strategy."

If we really think about any of these, we know they won't work. But it is tempting to think that the answer to our struggles could be that simple. Alas, as the great opera singer, Beverly Sills said, "There are no shortcuts to any place worth going."

At this season of the year, this season of introspection, as we form an accounting of our own souls, many of us are also taking **a moral inventory of the soul of our nation**. Where can we begin? How do we take stock of an entire country?

Like all of us and that proverbial glass – our nation is full. Some focus only on the angst and the fears – and there are many, to be sure. But there is also potential and possibility. There is greatness here. Like human beings, there are both strengths and weaknesses; there are triumphs and defeats in America today.

We can reflect on one of the virtues on Ben Franklin and Rabbi Levin's lists: JUSTICE. Is there **Justice** in our country? Yes AND No.

As a Jewish community, especially, we know the plight of the stranger; it is our moral imperative to eradicate injustice across this land. Until all are free, we are not truly a free nation. But how many of our relatives arrived on the shores of this great nation with little more than the clothing on their backs? They built homes and families and businesses, living the American Dream. Then again, tragically, we have just witnessed – again – the dreadful, unacceptable scenes in cities like Tulsa and Charlotte.

Less than 100 years ago half of us – all the women in this congregation – gained the right to vote with the ratification of the 19th Amendment. This summer history was made when a woman was nominated for President of the United States. As the commercial used to say, "We have come a long way baby." But it is not far enough.

This November will everyone who is entitled to vote have the ability to do so? I would hope so – but sadly, as far as we have come in a century, we have taken steps backwards too. Voting is both a right and an obligation for all of us.

The horrific tragedy at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando demonstrates the sad reality that we still have very, very far to go in embracing all people. At the same time, we are the generation that has seen Marriage Equality become the law of the land.

We have much work to be done in many areas. I have spoken about these and other issues before and will continue to do so in the coming days. But we still have to remember that a true and complete inventory includes both columns: assets and liabilities; credits and debits. And as with individuals, progress and growth and repair take time and insight and intelligence; it takes the shared efforts of citizens and communities working together. As in our personal lives, there are no shortcuts on the national scene: no magic wand to wave, no rousing words to shout, that can solve the challenges we face – and we do face challenges. We need tenacity and resolve, and loyalty to our country.

Over six decades ago, Illinois governor, and two-time presidential nominee, Adlai Stevenson said, (six decades ago), “Patriotism is not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion, but the tranquil and steady dedication of a lifetime.”

At this season, we and our nation are on the precipice between a time that was and the future that will be. In our personal, spiritual lives, we take steps towards self-improvement and growth.

Nationally, too, we must steps towards progress and advancement, while affirming the values we cherish: ideals that we embrace as a Jewish community as well: religious freedom, pluralism and diversity, celebrating the worth and dignity of every human being. They are the values embedded in the words of our Declaration of Independence:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness—

We have been taught: *Kol haOlam kulo, gesher tzar m’od*, “The whole world is a narrow bridge.” (Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav.) We have traveled across many bridges in our land – from ‘sea to shining sea’ --and we have many more to cross, in reaching out to one another in this pursuit.

Abraham and Isaac were walking up the mountain together, when Isaac broke the silence and said to his father, “*Avi*, Father?” And Abraham said to him, “*Hineni, b’nee*, Here I am, my son. Here I am.”

Rosh HaShanah affords us, indeed, it demands of us, that we stop along the path to see the journey we are on, as individuals and as a nation. With Abraham, we have to answer the question, "Where are we? And where are we headed?" What will be the next steps we will take to build a world full of kindness and morality and integrity.

There are two ways to build the tallest building.

One -- start building.

Or two -- tear down all the others.

The challenge of life is like that:

We can strive to be our best – personally and as a nation ---

or we can denigrate everything around us,

so we emerge as the tallest.

In this New Year, let us build: not walls but more bridges.

Let us fill our cups with waters of renewal and the air of human breath and life;

Let us fill the world with the values of Torah and with the principles of the founding fathers and leaders of this great nation.

Let us fill our senses with the sweetness of the petals of the rose and let us also focus our minds on the thorns that afflict the world.

In Hebrew, as you may know, letters of the alphabet signify numbers. In the year 5777, 77 is represented by the letter 'ayin' for seventy and the letter 'zayin' for seven. "Ayin, zayin," spells the Hebrew word, "OZ," which means 'strength.' The Psalmist has written (29.11):

*Adonai **OZ** l'amo yeetayn...* God will give STRENGTH to our people

Adonai y'varech et amo ba'shalom ... God will bless our people with peace.

I fervently pray that in the year 5777 our hearts, and the heart of our nation, are filled with optimism, with hope and with strength. AMEN