

Sermon/ Drasha Tisha B'Av -- Making a Good Impression

Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ 25-july-2015

When you get dressed in the morning, what's the last item of clothing you put on? Unless you wear a jacket, coat or hat, most of us put our shoes on last. The shoes you wear, though, do say a lot about you. Lisa Joseph, of Josephs Shoes in Sydney, said, "A shoe tells you everything about a man and a woman, it is a window to the soul." That's s-o-u-l ...not s-o-l-e!

"A shoe is a window to the soul." Wow! I wouldn't go that far. But many people immediately take notice of your shoes and judge you in business and personal relationships.

Beyond your age and income that are hinted to by your choice of footwear, researchers have found that character assessments based on shoes were surprisingly accurate. In one study from the University of Kansas, 63 students looked at images of 208 peoples' shoes and easily guessed psychological profiles. Here are some of the results.

-- Do you wear boring shoes? Boring shoes belonged to those who found it hard to form relationships because the wearers are emotionally 'aloof and repressive' and don't care what others think of them so they don't stand out in their general appearance.

-- Do you regularly clean and shine your shoes and have your shoes well organized? If so, you're conscientious.

-- Do you have colorful, flashy shoes, and think black & white is dull? You're an extrovert. Or perhaps, very image-conscious.

-- Are your shoes well worn-in? You may be a person who's relaxed and laid back.

Our shoes, clothing, body language and facial expression make impressions. And as the saying goes, "You only have one chance to make a first impression." Making a good first impression is something I suggest we think about today as we prepare for the observance of Tisha B'Av.

Every year as the Three Weeks and the Nine Days approach, we fear what the news will bring. Since our people cried for no reason in the desert, this time of year has been marked for tragedy. Ever since the *meraglim* (spies) slandered the Land of Israel, we've looked at this period with somber trepidation.

Every year we pray that this year will be different. And without fail, the noose of *golus* (exile) tightens during this mournful period. We've looked on in horror as the world has embraced the arch enemy of Israel, the Jewish people and the West. America and other major powers signed a deal with the largest state supporter of terror.

The country most responsible for international terror, itself an oil exporter, claims that it needs nuclear energy to power its electricity. Sanctions that have choked the Iranian economy are

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prepared to be repealed, releasing to Iran over \$100 billion. I'm guessing that not all or even much of that money will be used to build schools and roads. Blocks on importation of missiles and arms have been put on a path to removal that will allow Iran to rearm.

And before the ink on the agreement was dry, Iran's Supreme Leader addressed his nation and the world. In a speech periodically interrupted by chants of "Death to America" and "Death to Israel," the Ayatollah said:

We will never stop supporting our friends in the region and the people of Palestine, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon. Even after this deal, our policy toward the arrogant U.S. will not change.

We thought America was different. We assumed that we were safe and that the world had learned from the mistakes of the Holocaust era. We thought that democratic nations would stand behind their promises. We thought that they would keep their word. We thought that there would never again be a Neville Chamberlain. We thought that someone actually cared about us.

And we found out that we were wrong.

The timing of this, of course, isn't coincidental. The proposed nuclear agreement with Iran was signed during the 3 Weeks. The expiration of Congress' 60-day period to evaluate the agreement is scheduled to take place between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. There are no coincidences in a world where Hashem runs the show. And the meaning of all this is easy to see -- Hashem is trying to get our attention.

In most difficult situations the challenge is to know how to respond. Perhaps an appropriate area of consideration -- albeit small -- is the way in which we make a first impression with others.

What kind of first impression do you make with others? I'm not talking about your shoes, your clothes, or your style. What kind of first impression do you make with the expression on your face?

Do you smile warmly when you greet someone or pass them on the street? If you do, you're doing something important.

Comedienne Phyllis Diller said, "A smile is a curve that sets everything straight." A real smile has multiple benefits, if for no one other than yourself. When you smile, the muscles of your face allow more oxygen-carrying blood to flow to your brain and physiologically you enter a better state.

And as you may know, greeting others in a pleasant manner is a mitzvah. In Pirkei Avos / Ethics of the Fathers (1:15) we learn, "Shammai taught, 'Greet every person with a smiling and warm face!' " One's positive demeanor can be contagious, causing others to be affected with a glimmer of optimism and hope. A smile is a sign that you care about someone. And -- more than a good pair of shoes -- a broad, warm smile makes a great first impression.

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You might think this is common sense. But at times, common sense isn't very common. Everyone likes to think they're warm, welcoming, and pleasant to people. Every person. Every business. Every synagogue. But like the words of famous Gershwin song from *Porgy and Bess* -- It Ain't Necessarily So.

For my own personal efforts to respond to the 3 Weeks/ 9 Days, I decided to focus on smiling at people while I was cycling at Forest Park. One day this past week, I made a decided effort to smile broadly at every person I rode past on my first loop of the six-mile bike trail. I kept track of the number of people I passed, and how many people smiled back. Of the 54 people I passed -- only 12 people smiled back.

To be honest, my first thought in assessing those numbers was, "Less than 25% -- not many people smile, do they?" But upon further reflection, I realized that the point of my 'experiment' should not have been to grade others, but rather, so that *I* would do a better job of greeting people in a pleasant fashion. This was supposed to be for me, not others.

With that insight, the following thought came to mind; the Hebrew phrase in the aforementioned Ethics of the Fathers passage says to greet *kol adam* -- every person. But *kol adam* can also be understood to mean the *whole* person. Their spark of Divine and their image of G-d. Their *tzelem Elokim*. From that moment I began to look to see each person's *tzelem Elokim*, rather than keeping score of who was smiling at me.

The 'cosmic karma' of a smile can help in ways we can't begin to imagine -- as seen in the following story with which I'll conclude.

In the 1930s, near the city of Danzig lived a well-to-do Hasidic Rabbi. Dressed in a tailored black suit, wearing a top hat, and carrying a silver walking cane, the rabbi would take his daily morning stroll. During his morning walk it was the rabbi's custom to greet every man, woman, and child whom he met on his way with a warm smile and a cordial "Good morning." Over the years the rabbi became acquainted with many of his fellow townspeople this way and would always greet them by their proper title and name.

One person with whom he would exchange greetings was Herr Mueller, a Polish *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic German). "Good morning, Herr Mueller!" the rabbi would say, when he would greet the man who worked in the fields. "Good morning, Herr Rabbiner!" would come the response with a good-natured smile.

Then the war began. The rabbi stopped his strolls. Herr Mueller now wore an S.S. uniform and disappeared from the fields.

What happened to the rabbi was like that of much of the rest of Polish Jewry. He lost his family in the death camp of Treblinka, and, after great suffering, was sent to Auschwitz. One day, during a selection at Auschwitz, the rabbi stood in line with hundreds of other Jews awaiting the moment when their fates would be decided, for life or death. Dressed in a striped camp uniform, head and beard shaven and eyes feverish from starvation and disease, the rabbi looked like a walking skeleton. "Right! Left, left, left!" The voice in the distance drew nearer.

Suddenly the rabbi had a great urge to see the face of the man with the snow-white gloves, small baton, and steely voice who played G-d and decide who should live and who should die. His lifted his eyes and heard his own voice speaking:

"Good morning, Herr Mueller!"

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"Good morning, Herr Rabbiner!" responded a human voice beneath the S.S. cap adorned with skull and bones. "What are you doing here?"

A faint smile appeared on the rabbi's lips. The baton moved to the right - to life. The following day, the rabbi was transferred to a safer camp.

Years later, when the rabbi was in his eighties, said the following in relating this story: *"This is the power of a good-morning greeting. A man must always greet his fellow man."*

The observance and fast of Tisha B'Av will soon be upon us.

Our rabbis teach, *Kol hamisabeil al Yerushalayim zocheh vero'ah besimchasah* - *Whoever mourns Jerusalem merits to see its joy.* We know that the sin of *sinas chinom* / wanton hatred caused the *Bais Hamikdosh* / Holy Temple to be destroyed. If we would properly repent for that sin, we would merit returning to the lofty level we previously occupied and the return of the *Bais Hamikdosh*.

This year the events in the world have given us plenty to think about on Tisha B'Av. Perhaps if we truly commit ourselves to improving our behavior toward others in even a small way -- a smile -- we can make good 'impression' on ourselves, upon others, and to Hashem.