

Sermon/Drasha Rosh Hashana 1 "Become a Somebody"
Rabbi Ze'ev Smason, NHBZ – 2014/5775

Leo Montoya was minding his own business while riding his bicycle in Salt Lake City last Thursday. Quickly, however, the business of three teenagers became the 40-year-old Leo's personal concern, when the speeding SUV they were driving plowed through the guard rails and landed upside down in the nearby Jordan River.

When Mr. Montoya looked down from the bridge at the partially submerged vehicle, he heard the trapped teens screaming, and saw many of the onlookers just standing by watching helplessly. So, Leo sprung into action. He said:

I immediately jumped in and tried to get them out, but immediately realized it was a futile effort.

Montoya dove under the water, and felt a person's head in the submerged vehicle. The teen was strapped in, and a knife was needed to cut the seat belt. Leo realized it was going to take a long time -- too long.

In looking up and seeing all the people on the bridge, I realized, 'Hey, we've got enough people here. We can flip this truck over so that they can start breathing. I just convinced everybody that was watching on the bridge to immediately get in there (the river) and flip the vehicle. That was the only way those kids were going to live.

When asked if thought he'd be able to get enough people to turn the SUV over, Leo said:

I did think we could do it. I went in the water and was screaming quite a bit, but I knew we could do it.

Leo Montoya, a locksmith, was unemployed at the time of his heroic action. Leo the Locksmith unlocked a whole new set of opportunities for the boys whose lives he was instrumental in saving. And in the process of saving their lives, he showed not only incredible bravery, but remarkable humanity.

Thank G-d for the story of Leo Montoya -- because the events of the past year have contained so many assaults against humanity, and against our human-ness.

-- About 9 million Syrians have fled their homes since the outbreak of civil war in 2011, which the U.N says has killed over 190,000 people.

-- In Nigeria, Boko Haram has emerged as one of the world's most dangerous and violent Islamic terrorist sects. The tales of forced conversions of Christians, and kidnappings of young girls and bombings, murder and mayhem are terrifying.

-- Members of jihadist groups, such as the Al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Nusra, and ISIS have committed horrific atrocities including public and broad casted beheadings.

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-- Closer to home, less-dramatic, but nearly-as-inhumane stories of domestic violence and abuse have captured the nation's attention. Recently, we have heard story after sordid story of abuse from the NFL and other professional sports.

What does this all mean?

From the dawning of the creation, a war has existed between civilization and barbarism. Today, Rosh Hashana, marks the beginning of that struggle with the creation of the first human being.

The Yom Tov of Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of the creation of Adam and Eve. Rosh Hashana emphasizes the special relationship between G-d and humanity, and humanity's first actions toward the realization of our role in G-d's world. And what is that role? To express our uniqueness as human beings, and to express our humanity.

A recent startling paper by psychologist Richard Topolski at Georgia Regents University demonstrates today's challenge of expressing our humanity.

Participants in a study were told a hypothetical scenario in which a bus is hurtling out of control, bearing down on a dog and a human. Which do you save? With responses from more than 500 people, the answer was: It depends: What kind of human and what kind of dog?

Everyone would save a sibling, grandparent or close friend rather than a strange dog. But when people considered their own dog versus people less connected with them—a distant cousin or a hometown stranger—votes in favor of saving the dog came rolling in. And an astonishing 40% of respondents, including 46% of women, voted to save their dog over a foreign tourist.

Try asking your teenage kids, grand kids, nephews or nieces, or friends: Would you first try to save your drowning dog or a drowning stranger? For 40 years, the results have been about the same among Americans: One third vote for their dog, one third for the stranger, and one third don't know what they would do.

There's quite a history of scientists and philosophers trying to distill the unique essence of humanness. One can point to any number of defining human traits, as did Mark Twain when he proclaimed

Man is the only animal that blushes -- or has reason to

But I'd like to suggest the following criterion of humanity: "Crimes Against Humanity" is defined in a memorandum from The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as ".... particularly odious offenses in that they constitute a serious attack on human dignity or grave humiliation or a degradation of human beings ..."

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It makes sense to me to say that the opposite of "Crimes Against Humanity" -- perhaps "Outstanding Expressions of Humanity" -- are "particularly noteworthy or remarkable actions that constitute a significant elevation of human dignity or heightened respect or enhancement of the honor of human beings."

Actions that promote human dignity, respect and honor are outstanding expressions of humanity. And on Rosh Hashana, as we celebrate the creation of man, I'd like to share with you three ways in which exceptional humanity is expressed.

1) Any golf fans here? Golf fans and sports fans know that the greatest show in golf begins tomorrow in Scotland, when the best players on the planet will face off for the Ryder Cup. The eyes of the world will be upon them -- except for those of us in synagogue. Team America will go toe-to-toe with Team Europe and renew their classic rivalry.

Dating back to 1927, the Ryder Cup is a team tournament. In 1969, with the US having won 12 of the previous 13 contests the Americans looked extremely strong with golfers such as Jack Nicklaus and Lee Trevino. In that year's event, the British jumped ahead each morning, and the U.S. consistently rallied in the afternoon.

On the 18th hole of the final match, with the scores tied at 15½ apiece, Jack Nicklaus had to sink a putt from five feet out to tie or win. The Golden Bear calmly drained the putt. The great British golfer Tony Jacklin had to answer from just over two feet to halve the point and tie. Although his position was closer, the pressure was immense.

Shocking spectators and players alike, Nicklaus spared Jacklin, picking up his ball marker to concede the putt. He offered his hand: "I don't believe you'd have missed that putt, but I would never give you the opportunity in these circumstances." Jack Nicklaus's spontaneous gesture, which rankled several teammates, quickly became "The Concession." With the tie, the Americans, the defending champs, retained the Ryder cup. The British, however, felt like winners, having held their own for the first time in years.

To this day, Tony Jacklin regards his one-time adversary and his gracious act with fondness and admiration. Mr. Nicklaus's 1969 teammate Tommy Aaron laments: "You wouldn't see it again today."

Making a concession. Letting someone saving face. Accepting a request for forgiveness. Not allowing someone to be embarrassed or stay embarrassed. Acting in such a fashion is called graciousness.

William Hazlitt defined grace as: *The absence of everything that indicates pain or difficulty, hesitation or incongruity.* Acting with graciousness is emulating a trait of the Almighty, Himself. Included in the *13 Attributes* as *chen*, when we can 'make a concession', we beautifully express our humanity.

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2) His nickname in high school was Dash because of his stutter. President Obama later gave him the nickname "Sheriff Joe," for his role overseeing the Recovery Act funds. He's been called 'The Happy Warrior', and even has a dwarf planet named after him. I'm referring to one of the more interesting politicians in recent American history: Vice President Joe Biden.

Whether you like his politics or not, Joe Biden is an engaging fellow. I met him in person when VP Biden, then a freshman Senator from Delaware, was invited to speak at UCLA in my freshman year. When Senator Biden walked in the meeting room for his noon-time discussion, there were only 5 or 6 students. Joe looked at us with a big smile and said, 'Well, I guess it's just you and me!' I was stunned that a man of that stature didn't take himself too seriously. And many years later, I found out why our current VP, also known by the nickname 'Amtrak Joe', was so non-plussed by the small attendance.

On December 18, 1972, a few weeks after the national election, Biden's wife and one-year-old daughter were killed in an automobile accident while shopping in Delaware. At age 30 (the minimum age required to hold the office), Biden had become the sixth-youngest senator in U.S. history. But the accident left him a single father to two young sons. Biden began the practice of commuting every day by Amtrak train for 1½ hours each way from his home in the Wilmington suburbs to Washington, D.C. -- rather than spending the week in the capital -- which he continued to do throughout his Senate career. A single father for five years, Biden left standing orders that he be interrupted in the Senate at any time if his sons called. In remembrance of his wife and daughter, Biden does not work on December 18, the anniversary of the accident.

Vice President Biden is often called by the nickname 'Amtrak Joe' for the more than 7,000 round trips on Amtrak he took between Delaware and Washington, D.C. during his 36 years in the Senate -- many of which were taken out of deep love for and devotion to his young, bereaved children.

We're well familiar with the phenomenon of the popular, successful, charismatic guy who is admired, respected and maybe envied by everyone -- except by those who know him best; his family. Behind closed doors with his family, "Mr. Nice Guy" turns into a raging, egotistical, narcissistic ogre. If a person is a mensch with his family -- that means that in Hashem's eyes, he's truly a mensch.

And what does the word mensch mean? Not 'a man'. It means, 'a person'. 'A human being'. A homo sapien with a neshama/soul who expresses his humanity by treating his own family with kindness and compassion.

Joe Biden was a hot-shot US Senator at the age of 30, with the world at his fingertips. But more important to him than fame, fortune and power -- were his two orphaned children and the memory of his deceased wife and daughter. You might not like Joe Biden's politics -- but in our search for humanity, there's a lot to learn from Amtrak Joe.

3) Israel's national soccer team made a name for themselves last year in Ukraine -- but

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not due to their soccer-playing skills. Rather, they caused a stir by their reaction to rain falling upon some Ukrainian children.

As the national anthems of Israel and Ukraine played before a game in Kiev, the Israelis shielded a group of children lined up before them from a chilly rainfall. Photos showed that the Ukrainian team appeared indifferent to the children's plight. As is the custom in international matches, the children joined the players for the singing of the anthems when suddenly torrential rain began to fall. The Israeli players removed their training jackets and covered the children after one of them noticed that a child was obviously shivering.

"We made the gesture and I hope that all the children returned home safely," said Israeli soccer star Itay Shechter.

Another player Eitan Tibi added,

"When it began to rain during the anthems, we decided to take off our training jackets because we saw that the kids that were with us were freezing in the cold strong rain. We immediately decided to place the training jackets on the children so that they would feel a little more cozy and warmer."

The incident caused media attention in Ukraine and in Russia, criticizing the Ukrainian team. *"The human reflex was to do what the Israeli players did,"* one newspaper admirably commented.

The 'human reflex' -- a reflexive action expressing inherent humanity. The depth of truly human actions can be seen in so many ways from observing and watching our Israeli brethren.

This past summer, 30,000 Israelis, attended the funeral of Max Steinberg, the US citizen and IDF soldier who was killed in battle. This was yet another example of Israel at its best. Max's family thought that just a small group of people would attend the funeral. The Steinbergs had no family in Israel, so who did they think would come? Thousands and thousands of people came to the funeral of someone they never met. And they came because a stranger, Max Steinberg, who threw his lot in with the Jewish people and the Jewish state, fought to protect them and lost his life in so doing.

Max's mom said, *"this would not have happened in the States, all these people who didn't know him"*. Israel, however troubled and torn by war, is a very special place. There are no people in the world who are more kind, caring, and compassionate than Israelis. In Israel, you'll find humanity at its finest.

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Today I began my remarks with the story of Leo Montoya, the Utah locksmith who saved the lives of three teenagers.

When the excitement was over and the teens were rescued and safe, Leo Montoya viewed the footage of the rescue (caught on cellphone, of course), and he looked as if he was about to cry. 'As far as I know, a couple of kids get to live because of my actions,' Montoya told NBC TV, the glimmer of a grin breaking. 'I feel like I'm somebody.'

Five thousand seven hundred and seventy five years ago, on the day of Rosh Hashanah, the first of Tishrei, Hashem created the first person, Adam, and his wife Chava (Eve). He created them and all their descendants to follow, with the goal that each of them should 'be a somebody.'

To be a 'somebody', you don't necessarily have to jump into a river and save someone's life. To be a somebody, In the world's biggest golf tournament you don't have to make a magnanimous, charitable gesture. To be a somebody, you don't have to spend hours of extra time for years and years for your kids, give your jacket to a shivering child, or go to a funeral of someone you don't know.

But if you follow in the footsteps of these examples in your own way, and in your own circumstances, you will be a somebody. Make concessions. Act with graciousness. Allow people to save face. Be a mensch with your family, even when no one is looking. Act with the care, love and compassion of an Israeli.

You'll be a somebody. You'll be a human being in the finest sense of the term. And you'll be celebrating your humanity -- that great potential with which we were created on Rosh Hashana