

*A MORAL BUCKET LIST*

Rabbi Deborah A. Hirsch

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Yom Kippur—“The Day of Judgment—Even the hosts of heavens are judged”. We enter the sanctuary today—our hearts, filled with memories, hope, trepidation, awe. We anticipate the final blast of the Shofar—its shrill pierce will inject eternity into our hearts. The Torah portion we read this morning provides a frame for our actions—I put before you life and death—choose life.

White is the color of the day—white robes, white Torah covers, but white is an achromatic color—literally a color without color—we, today, are ghost-like—all of our shortcomings are visible to God—no-where to hide. White—the color of the shroud one traditionally is buried in. Today is a day we pray the that gates of life open wide before us—we attempt to reorganize our priorities. The *Kol Nidre* prayer chanted last night foreshadowed the fact that many of the pledges we make this day will vanish like vapor on a window in the days and weeks ahead. This day ticks with the urgency of time. *Yizkor* not only brings to momentary life, those for whom our hearts ache, it reminds us, too, of our own mortality...we

know our days, too, are numbered. We know we must make our lives count so that the white space between the dates that will be inscribed on our gravestones, or in the hearts of those we leave behind, will have value and meaning. Living is about making a difference.

There are times when life imitates pop culture—when we adopt fictional realities and make them our own. How many in this congregation remember Edward Cole and Carter Chambers? Justin Zuckham? Not many, But if I were to ask, how many of you here are familiar with the term Bucket List, how many of you could raise your hand?

Indeed, Justin Zuckham, in his 2007 classic award winning film—coined the phrase, ‘bucket list’— He turned the phrase, Kick the Bucket on its head. The website, *Personal Excellence*, defines a bucket a list as, “a list of all the goals you want to achieve, dreams you want to fulfill and life experiences you desire to experience before you die.” Like Hugo, in *Bye Bye Birdie*—Zuckham affirmed for each of us, I’ve got a lot of living to do.’

Indeed if you Google, ‘bucket list,’ numerous sites emerge. Recently I took a Facebook “have you done” challenge to discover I had done a majority of the posted items, including being in the back of a police wagon, hot air ballooning, visited Petra, sleep on a beach under the stars, visited all but 6

of our states. There are those opportunities I probably will take a pass-on, like Base Jumping or climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. William Wallace wrote, “Every man dies, not every man really lives.” Bucket Lists help us set priorities. They empower us not only to choose life, but organize what in life we choose to experience: For me Seeing the Northern Lights, a train ride across the Canadian Rockies, living in Israel, again, settling in the Berkshires—to name a few-- I know I’m at not alone—I would venture that many here today have crafted a ‘to-do’ list—whether projecting out over the year or, God willing, the decades ahead.

But today, is about stripping away our material desires and focusing most acutely on turning away from those parts of ourselves that are selfish, boastful and unforgiving and turning towards those virtues that provide us with intrinsic meaning, that hold fast despite the tides of time.

David Brooks’ book, *The Road to Character*, posits two types of virtues: the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues. He wrote, “ The resume virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace.” Those skills we all know—drive, intellect, multi-tasking, competition, quest for success. Many of us have had the privilege of creating resumes. We know the drill—dynamic adjectives that describe our passion and acumen. There are those

'follow-through statements' that demonstrate, quantifiably, the outcomes of our success. I managed a 50 million dollar account and enabled clients to receive a return of 8.7%." Or, I taught an AP chemistry class in which 85% of the students placed out of first year college chemistry. Brooks, wrote, "We live in a society that encourages us to think about how to have a great career but leaves many of us inarticulate about how to cultivate the inner life. The competition to succeed and win admiration is so fierce, that it becomes all-consuming. The consumer marketplace encourages us to live by a utilitarian calculus, to satisfy our desires and lose sight of the moral stakes involved in everyday decisions...We live in a culture that teaches us to promote and advertise ourselves and to master the skills required for success, but that gives little encouragement to humility, sympathy, and honest self-confrontation, which are necessary for building character."

In stark contrast, the eulogy virtues, Brooks wrote, are "the ones that are talked about at your funeral." When I meet with families prior to a funeral, I often ask them to reflect on the intangible gifts they've received from their loved ones. At first, there is a slight, almost uncomfortable pause, and then family members share characteristics not inscribed on a Harvard diploma or tax return bottom line: Words like, compassionate,

caring, loving, humble, protective. These descriptions quickly dwarf words like, successful, great tennis player or Ivy League. Like eating an artichoke—sometimes those qualities that are most enduring—the sweetest--that get transmitted *l'dor va dor*—from one generation to the next, are only crystal clear to our human eyes when we remove the 'measurable success choke' that overlays that which truly gives us purpose.

This struggle between external quests and inner strength is nothing new; it's just gotten more intense—more out of control in recent years and perhaps, destined to stay on that trajectory. It should come as no surprise that Judaism, too, has its Bucket List of core human attributes. In recent years, synagogues have offered courses on Jewish Mindfulness—read hear yoga blended with guided meditation. Other congregations have taken a 21<sup>st</sup> Century approach to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century course of study called *Musar*, defined as instruction or reproof. *Musar*, you might say was the first Jewish Self-Help Movement. *Musar's* objective—to motivate its followers to relinquish their focus on success, wealth, ambition, and instead, deliberately contemplate one's own 'soul' traits. As we know, each of us has a unique genetic makeup and our DNA doesn't change over a lifetime. DNA testing cannot peer into our souls—it cannot tell us what level of

compassion we will demonstrate when called upon---it cannot inform us our moral character.

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, founder of the *Mussar* movement, used to say that “it is easier to learn the entire Talmud than to change even one character trait.’ “Salanter and his followers believed that our ethical behavior could only become second nature when we were deliberate—when we focused our attentions to achieve that particular behavior. Our acts of compassion, or truth telling cannot be random—they result from our deliberate focus.. What are our ‘soul traits?’—They are the timeless values we learned as children and too often tuck away out of sight when confronted with daily pressures and emerging societal norms-- Humility, gratitude, patience, generosity, kindness, strength, trust, and truth, to mention a few.

Brooks, derived part of his thesis from the renowned 20<sup>th</sup> Century Orthodox Rabbi, Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s book, *Lonely Man of Faith*, specifically, Soloveitchik’s interpretation of the two Adams found in Genesis One and Two. Brooks suggests that “Adam I, is the ambitious, career focused side of our nature—the external, resume Adam.” It’s that part of us that pushes us forward—achieving success, collecting trophies along the way. Adam II is our internal *persona*. Adam II “wants to embody certain

moral qualities—a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong.”

You might say, these ‘soul traits’ are like apple pie. Indeed everyone appreciates them, but focusing on each one for a week or a month or a year to improve who we are—doing *shuvah*—turning from appreciation to making a daily effort to incorporate those values into our lives—especially when they abut against work and societal expectations and demands-- that’s a different challenge. Which of these soul traits get left behind when climbing the corporate ladder—competing on the soccer field—or engaging in heated debates over politics?

Our societal norms do not make it easy for us, or our children, to strengthen soul traits. We are living in an ever increasing “it’s about me society.” Brooks provides support for his supposition that society has dramatically changed over the past 80 years—we have moved away from being a society defined by those core character traits. He suggests that we have experienced “a broad shift from a culture of humility to the culture of Big Me—from a culture that encouraged people to think humbly of themselves to a culture that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe.” Brooks cites a 1950’s Gallup Poll that “asked high

school seniors if they consider themselves to be a very important person. 12 per cent responded, yes. In 2005 the same question was asked of high school seniors, this time 80% responded yes. Even more alarming, there has been a sharp increase among young people who, on surveys respond affirmatively with statements like “I am an extraordinary person’ and “I like to look at my body.”

How do we understand this 180 shift over the past decades? Brooks posits, that the last century saw the rise of 4 distinct generations: The Traditionalists—those who grew up before the end of World War II, the Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z. The traditionalists experienced the Great Depression, World II, the bombing of Hiroshima. They were and remain the generation that was disciplined, humble, fiercely loyal, and a generation that worked hard and sought the outward reward of job security—the retirement gold watch said it all.

This generation stands in sharp contrast to the Baby Boomer generation that followed—the ‘Me Generation’, for whom success was guaranteed as our country emerged from World War II. Defined as workaholics this generation went on to have the highest divorce and second marriage rates. And next, came Generation X that was defined by

Watergate, and the end of the Cold War: Two-parent working- families was the norm—the birth of the latch-key generation--a generation that would not acquire the same wealth as their parents. And next marched in the Millennials. A 2014 Pew Study reported the following: “Millenials are relatively unattached to organized politics and religion. They are linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, in no rush to marry—and optimistic about the future.” This is the generation that grew up in front of computer screens, products of a digital age, and like their computers, the children of this generation are the most programmed—most structured. Randy Blazak, in her 2016 article, *The Millennial Effect: Here comes Generation Z* wrote, “The great contribution of the Millennial generation is the recognition that you are not your job. They’ve seen their parents, painfully loyal to companies and careers, stabbed in the back, downsized and outsourced. Work is now something to provide you an income while you follow your bliss. Why commit to a profession that is just going to be replaced by a computer or Chinese child labor?”

And who is Generation Z? Ann Kingston’s this newcomer “as tolerant but also overconfident, narcissistic and entitled.” Generation Z is the only generation to solely know smart phones—dumb phones weren’t an option.

They are weaned on instant contact—social media that can tell the world what they had for lunch. Kingston’s analysis gives support to Brook’s premise—our moral character fabric is being frayed. In contrast, an Inc. Magazine article reported that the Generation Z population ‘appears to be more realistic instead of optimistic, are likely to be more career-minded, and can quickly adapt to new technology to work more effectively, The article also cited that “more than half the Millennials and Generation Z polled, stated that honesty is the most important quality in a good leader”.

Surely our environment and societal external factors have deep impact on how we behave—more the reason why honing soul traits is so necessary.

Jewish tradition teaches, everything is found in *Torah*. On *Rosh HaShanah* I listed those Divine Attributes implanted within humanity—attributes that mirror our soul traits. This robust list includes mercy, justice, and compassion. Oddly--one human trait –primary soul trait glaringly missing is, empathy—the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Why isn’t empathy one of the thirteen God-given attributes? If we scratch the surface a little deeper, we find there is no word for empathy in *Torah*. Modern Hebrew use *Empatia* or - *Hizdahut Rigshit*—literally, ‘to

identify with feelings'. After pondering this glaring omission, it struck me, empathy is uniquely a human response --not a Divine attribute. It is a human soul trait. God may have implanted empathy into our souls—but God cannot possess it. God may know our feelings, our every action, but God cannot feel our human pain—it's a human thing to do. God displays love, and compassion, anger and forgiveness, but not empathy.

If there is a soul-trait that needs to be nurtured and protected in each generation, it is the soul trait of empathy. Indeed, each generation has its unique collection of challenges. Let me focus a moment on Generation Z—those born during the mid-90s and later—our teens and college students. Too many of these youth are also poised on trajectory that at times spins out of control—more than previous generations. All parents can empathize with what it is like to be a teen—but only so far. Phrases like, I remember when I...fill in the blank, too often aren't very helpful to these young adults. Today's world demands that empathy needs to be infused with a heavy dose of sympathy—feeling pity or sorrow for our children. Last summer (2015), The Today Show ran a series entitled, *The Secret Lives of Teens*. It featured youth at The Newport Academy Rehab Center. The students who spoke openly on camera were bright, college-

bound, upper middle class students. They mentioned the helicopter parent syndrome—parents who hover, filling in, like a dance card, every hour of their child’s free time with some activity. These teens openly talked about the mounting anxiety they felt each and every day. The show highlighted one recent survey that reported 1 in 5, 20% of college students have engaged in self-harm—usually cutting: One in five—a staggering number. One teen confessed that cutting, “took her mind away from the emotional pain because “something else hurt.”

And there is a new legion of parents that has formed that has surpassed helicopter parents. The School Superintendents Website recently posted the following: Today, behold the era of the Gen-X “stealth-fighter parent.” Stealth-fighter parents do not hover. They choose when and where they will attack. If the issue seems below their threshold of importance, they save their energy and let it go entirely. But if it crosses their threshold and shows up on their radar, they will strike — rapidly, in force and often with no warning.” Yet, the added pressure of knowing that parents are hovering and making strategic strikes take their toll as well.

One reality our youth face today that was not present in previous generations—to which adult here can empathize—is the impact of social

media. Our youth have nowhere to hide. The pressure to text, tweet, face time, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, leaves one breathless. The teens interviewed on the Today Show complained that social media has “complicated their lives, forcing them to pretend they’re outgoing and having fun when the reality is much different.” And when we couple this with dramatic increase in cyber-bullying, the results have been unfortunately deadly. Today’s teens are always ‘on’ Let’s face it, we live in New York...the city where two year olds are interviewed for pre-school, the city in which, if parents choose, it’s possible to pay a good portion of college tuition for 14 years, counting preschool, before their son or daughter walks onto a college campus. And the stress doesn’t end once at college. Emory University’s website Emory 4U, states boldly the sobering fact that one in ten college students has made a plan for suicide and 5.2% of Emory Students have seriously considered suicide in the last 12 months—and that is less than the national average of 6% of undergraduate students. Suicide rates have triples on college campuses since the 1950s. The Ivy League and similarly competitive schools have the highest rate. As I mentioned on *Rosh HaShanah* white males have the highest suicide rate--times greater than females. These are mind-boggling statistics indeed.

During the course of this summer alone, I unfortunately heard of two of our college students who knew someone at college—in one case, a close friend, who committed suicide this past year. I have always admired MIT for its grading policy. On its registrar’s office website it states clearly: “Freshman grading is designed to ease the transition from high school by giving students time to adjust to factors like increased workloads and variations in academic preparation. First semester is pass-fail. A, B, and C grades are used during the second semester so that freshmen can begin the progression to regular A-F grading in the sophomore year.”

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting that parents or teens need to readjust long-term dreams or goals, or that academics, activities and community service aren’t important, but I am imploring, that the response to a child, high school or college student’s cry of, I’m feeling pressured—overwhelmed, is not, I know how you feel or everyone feels the same way at some time in his or her life—you’ll get through it, rather, our response needs to be, what can we do to help you through what is clearly a stressful and anxiety ridden time in your life.. We need first, to validate our children’s pain and then draw upon our God given soul traits of love and compassion and doing what’s right—to help our most precious loved

ones—*shuv*—to turn to new possibilities.

Indeed, Soloveitchik's Two Adams exists—the external, ambitious Adam, and the inwardly focused one. In order to live—we need both—one can't survive without the other. We need drive, but we need drive to be tempered by compassion, sympathy and empathy. We need to realize the sacrifice involved in certain decisions, and for us not to gloat in their successes.

When our soul-traits takes charge and help inform the decisions we make...when we ground our aspirations and dreams in language and behaviors that showcase our 'soul traits' of goodness, truth, humility, honesty and compassion—when, in our human inter-actions—with spouses, children, co-workers we temper drive and ambition and act with our humanity...then *Nashuva*, we turn, from 'success oriented goals,'—the resume goals, to creating lives more reflective of the values we treasure. And when things go wrong, we still can possess the spiritual *machzi* to get us back on track. May, we in the year ahead, create those Bucket Lists that inspire and challenge. And when we peer into those buckets, may we see

the good that is within each of us, reflect back into our own eyes. *Keyn Yehi Ratzon.*