

I have a confession. I have road rage. It is a mild case, and generally means that whoever is a passenger in my car gets to hear how frustrated or annoyed I am at the other drivers on the road. Years of surprising people by my great frustration at other drivers has led me to start warning people when they first drive with me that I have road rage *and* that it comes out at me yelling at the other drivers from the safety of my car.

This character trait is something I have been working on moderating in the hopes of being able to eliminate it. The road rage first manifested itself when I was in college in Birmingham, Alabama. I had never seen so many drivers disobeying the rules of the road and found it incredibly frustrating. One day, in college, when I was complaining about it to a friend, who happened to be a psychology major, she informed me that she knew I had a tendency to express road rage because I had so many bumper stickers on my car. I looked at her in confusion, and she explained that a study had been done which correlated road rage with the willingness to put bumper stickers on one's car. The study was published in 2008 and was undertaken by Colorado State University social psychologist William Szlemko. The most interesting part of the study, to me, was that they found that it did not matter what the bumper sticker said or showed but just the fact that it was stuck to the car was a correlation.

I have been fascinated by this exchange ever since because while I no longer have bumper stickers on my car since it is leased and I do not want to cause it damage. I love bumper stickers in the same way that I love wearing t-shirts with snarky phrases on them and always have. In middle school my favorite shirt said "Everyone is entitled to my opinion." While in high school the t-shirts generally had youth group jokes written on them,

in college it was political jokes, and now my favorite shirt says "Talk Southern to Me." I believe my tendency to love slogans on my t-shirts is that they help me to express myself to those around me without needing to say them. As an introvert, I find small talk often difficult and a catchy slogan or phrase is often a conversation starter.

Perhaps you are wondering how my exhibiting road rage is connected to Rosh HaShanah. I could have easily chosen any other of the less than ideal traits that I possess to model what I hope everyone in this sanctuary is doing, being introspective during these days of awe. I am working on being honest with myself and with you so that I can marshal the courage necessary to grow. I am learning that I am not alone and that Judaism may have a strategy to help me and help you, too. The strategy is called *Mussar* in Hebrew. The word *Mussar* is often translated as "discipline", a method of thinking and acting in order to overcome natural tendencies.

Mussar has helped to give me a Jewish vocabulary for speaking about my character traits, both the good and the bad. And I would like to challenge the idea that there is no place for this discussion on Rosh Hashanah. I believe my road rage, and my attempts to combat it even though it appears to be a factor of my personality, by drawing a parallel. When I am driving and someone overtakes me on the righthand side only to turn left in front of me or when someone drives through a red light, my automatic assumption is to get frustrated and sometimes to get angry. But the better response would be to think of reasons about why someone would do that. Instead of assuming that another driver is intent on making me mad, I need to consider other possibilities. Maybe she is headed to the hospital where her child is sick. Maybe he is late to a vital meeting. Maybe they are late to

pick up a child from daycare. Maybe there is another factor which I am unable to see that I would understand if only I could ask.

We all have character traits, called *middot* in Hebrew, that we can develop. Many religious communities have practices designed to foster moral growth. Mussar can help us identify a specific trait that we are ready to develop, but Mussar is not a quick fix or recipe. It is more like a moral diet, a way of being in the world that will give us a different perspective on ourselves. The *middah*, the virtue, that I hope to integrate into my life is *dan l'khaf zechut* or judging others favorably. For many, the practice of Mussar reminds them of Buddhist practices, for meditation, contemplation, and discipline are central to Mussar. But more than all of that Mussar asks the individual to be reflective and deliberate in their actions. Some examples of the *middot* or values are humility, love, abstinence and order. The *middah* or value of judging others favorably is one that I believe in and one that I need to work on every single day. I will likely need the help of God, my family, my friends, and each of you. However, I know I must be the one to do the work, to accept the moral discipline and grow to act in a way that does not come easily to me.

The section of Genesis we just read, the Akedah or binding of Isaac, helps us practice what it means to judge others favorably. I know that I am not alone when I question why our ancestors chose this section of Torah to read during Rosh Hashanah. What does this *parsha*, this portion, have to teach us as we contemplate the choices we made during the past year both good and bad? What lessons do we take from it as we enter into the ten days of repentance and Yom Kippur? I believe there are many lessons which our ancestors wanted us to find, including learning to judge others favorably.

When we read that Abraham, who fought with God for the lives of those citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, does not question or argue with God when asked to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him to God, we question. How could Abraham not care about Isaac more? How does one sacrifice a child? I know that I could never have done it, and I am not yet a parent. We also question what Isaac was thinking. Did Isaac know he was to be the sacrifice? If so, how could he not question Abraham or God about why? If Isaac did not know, why did he not fight Abraham when he was binding him upon the alter?

These are all legitimate questions. We are allowed to be curious, we are even encouraged to be curious by our tradition. The issue is what we do with our questions. If we use our questions to place judgment on one another, saying to ourselves "I am better than him" or "I would have done better than her," we are acting upon feelings of judgement. Rather, Judaism through the practice of Mussar challenges each one of us to rather look at Abraham and Isaac and say "I may not understand his reason for doing that, or asking that, or forgetting that but I know he did the best that he could." I would like to believe that we can still learn from Abraham's action. Rather than judge him as 'guilty' or rejecting his behavior as unworthy, I will ask myself, what could Abraham have been thinking? Why would the same person who stood up to defend people he had never met choose to sacrifice his son to God? I am trying to be open to the possibility that my first response is not my best response. Each one of us is challenged every single day to live our life to the fullest, to be the best person we can be.

This is not always an easy task, and our tradition knows this. One of my favorite Hasidic stories, believed to have first been circulated in the 1700s speaks of Zusya. Martin Buber retold the story saying:

Once, the Hassidic rabbi Zusya came to his followers with tears in his eyes.

They asked him:

"Zusya, what's the matter?"

And he told them about his vision:

"I learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life."

The followers were puzzled.

"Zusya, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us.

What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?"

Zusya replied:

"I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?' and that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the promised land?'"

Zusya sighed:

"They will say to me, 'Zusya, why weren't you Zusya?'"

The story of Zusya also teaches us to judge one another favorably because when we die, when we return to God, we will not be judged based on what *others* did or did not do

nor on what others were capable of but rather we will be judged on what *we* did or did not do. Mussar teaches us that it is important to be self reflective. That we can not make a positive impact on the world if we do not first look inward and make a positive impact on ourselves. We will ultimately be judged on whether or not we fulfilled our own potential. The theme of forgiveness is woven into this judgment because if we are not willing to forgive those around us, how will we be able to forgive ourselves? And if we do not forgive ourselves, we can never love ourselves fully, and we will never be able to fulfill our potential.

In the 13th century, Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerondi taught “If you see someone who has achieved a prominent position but whose behavior is inappropriate, do not say, ‘If I were in his place, I wouldn’t do as he does.’ You do not know what tomorrow will bring, and you are no different from him or anyone else. Perhaps that prestigious position would sway you as it has swayed him. Only when you reach his place and his position and overcome your own tendencies will you have the right to question his conduct.”

This quote is the reason I chose to write about judging others favorably this Rosh Hashanah. Rabbeinu Yonah wrote this in the 13th century and it still rings true today. So much of the world has changed and yet basic human nature remains the same. Each one of us has strengths and each one of us struggles. We all know this. The question we must ask ourselves during this period of reflection, of repentance, of seeking is if we are willing to look inward. Are we willing to look closely at our behaviors and choose one to work on in the coming year. I know that I will be continuously working on the *middah*, the value, of

judging others favorably every time I come to services and flip to the following meditation written by Chaim Stern during silent prayer:

Holy One
give me a quiet heart,
and help me to hear the still,
small voice that speaks within me.
It calls me to come close to You
and to grow in Your likeness.
It teaches me to do my work faithfully,
even when no one's eye is upon me.
It counsels me to judge others kindly
and to love them freely,
for it persuades me to see divinity
in everyone I meet.
Help me, O God,
to come to the end of each day
feeling that I used its gifts wisely
and faced its trials bravely.

I would like to ask a favor of you. If you happen to be driving with me during the year, please remind me of this confession. Help me continue growing into my best self, and I

promise to do the same for you. We each have the potential to grow, and Mussar is one of the tools we can chose to help us along the journey.

May each one of you find strength in working on your personal middah, your personal value, this year. And may we all be inscribed in the book of life for a year of health, happiness, and peace. L'shanah tovah tikatev v'taihatem - may you be inscribed and sealed for a good year.