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Rosh Hashanah – Second Day

The word was conscience. C-O-N-S-C-I-E-N-C-E. That word has become quite special to me because now whenever I read or write it, I think of the day that I won Mrs. McCall's sixth grade spelling bee. Now I had always liked spelling but I had never done much to develop that skill. I practiced the lists that I was given for homework, but I had never been like the Scripps Spelling Bee kids who spend hours a day pouring over words in the dictionary. So when I was declared the class champion, I was surprised. I could hardly contain my excitement. That was up until Mrs. McCall told me that the next step would be competing in the school-wide spelling bee the following week. She said what an honor it would be to represent my entire class and if I won, it would be as if they all had won. And I can still remember her final words, "I really think you could win this."

I now know that Mrs. McCall was trying to be encouraging, but as a somewhat shy sixth grade student, all I could hear was the following. I am going to have to go up in front of the entire school and spell words. If I get one right, I'll go on to the next round. But if I get one word wrong, that's it. I'll be eliminated, everyone will know, and I will have let myself, my teacher, and my class down. It would be so humiliating. I just couldn't take the chance, so here's what I did. The day of the bee, my mom came in to wake me up and I told her that I was sick as a dog. Interestingly enough, my *conscience* did not object as I faked my illness and told her that I couldn't get out of bed. Unfortunately, I was going to have to stay home that day. Being the loving, compassionate woman that she is, my mom said that she understood. I think she was saying that she understood that I was sick and wouldn't want me to go in if I wasn't feeling well. It wouldn't be until years later that I told her the real reason I couldn't go that day. I was so scared of making a mistake that I couldn't participate.

I look back at that moment with regret. That could have been a great experience but I was so worried about being anything less than perfect that I held myself back. Chances are I probably wouldn't have won the bee. But I could have done a good job. I might have spelled a few words right. And at the very least I would have tried...if only I had had given myself the chance.

I often wonder where this need for perfection comes from. I think that some of it has to do with the fear of disappointing the people around us. Take our parents for example. They often set goals and have expectations of us. These can come from a good place, because they love us and want the best for us. Already Brad and I say that our child is going to have to work hard and get good grades so that he or she can go to Cornell, our alma mater. Now, I know that we're just joking, but we should be careful about that. I know many people who feel like they have to go to a certain college because that's where dad went or pursue a certain career path because mom is a doctor, lawyer or teacher. They end up trying to do what they think their parents want them to do. But then, when they don't get accepted or don't get the coveted job offer, they feel like they have let their parents down. They feel inadequate that they couldn't reach their parents level. And whatever college they do end up going to or career path that they end up taking ends up being a disappointing back-up.

Now sometimes the opposite happens. Parents will have failed in certain areas of their lives and they hope that through their children they will be able to correct their own mistakes. Some parents also place expectations on their children based on experiences they didn't get the

chance to have. You sometimes see this with parents who encourage their child to pursue a sport, like tennis or ice skating. But it can really be applied to any hobby or activity. It reminds me of a show I've seen on TLC that basically follows parents who have entered their little boys and girls into demanding beauty pageants. Not surprisingly, many of these stage moms are themselves frustrated beauty queens. In order to make up for their own pasts, they try to turn their children into pageant winners. These kids are made to feel like they have to look, perform, and behave perfectly. Then if they don't win, their parents often start picking them apart and pointing out their flaws. And these are young children, some of whom can't be more than five years old. They are getting the message that in order to be successful, you need to be perfect. They are also probably getting the message that if they want their parents to love them and compliment them, then they have to look and act this way. I can only imagine the damage this is going to cause later in their lives.

And it's not just our parents who place these expectations on us. The list goes on with friends, teachers, coaches, bosses, and even rabbis who set high standards for us. I'm also sure that we've been known to do it to others. It isn't that surprising, considering we live in a society that encourages this behavior. When you look in magazines and watch television shows, you notice this. It seems like everyone is thin and beautiful. They have fantastic careers, live in well decorated homes, have loving marriages and well behaved children. We know this isn't always true, but even so, we feel like we have to try to live up to this model of perfection. It makes me think of a couple I know who got divorced a few years ago. They had had a big, beautiful wedding. Every detail was impeccable from the gorgeous flowers to the multiple tiered cake. After the wedding, they moved into a new home and began to create their life together. From the outside, it looked like they were the perfect couple. Whenever I saw them together, they were smiling and laughing. They were always affectionate towards one another. But then, I found out that they were getting divorced. Like most everyone, I had no idea that they were having problems. The woman later told me that she knew early on that it wasn't going to work, but she never felt like she could admit that she was unhappy. She had had that gorgeous wedding and had been married just a short period of time, and felt like she should be in that blissful newlywed state. So she forced herself to keep going. She says that she stayed in the marriage much longer than she wanted to because admitting that things weren't perfect, made her feel like something was wrong with her. It made her feel like she was a failure.

While this pressure to be perfect comes from the outside, eventually we begin place these expectations on ourselves. We can be so hard on ourselves. But why is this? In this morning's Torah portion, we learn that not even God demands perfection from us. In the story of creation, we hear that day after day, God performs new tasks and brings new life into the world. There is light, there are plants, animals, and then of course, human beings. But if you listen carefully, you will notice that each time God creates something new, God looks at His work and sees that it is *tov*. It is good. Now with God's power and might, God certainly could have set the bar higher. God could have made each creation better than good. God could have made each being and each object perfect. It could have said God saw that it was *mushlam*. But God doesn't do this, because God doesn't desire perfection. God didn't want us to read this and think that we needed to be perfect. By saying that things were good, we learn that good is enough for God. So if we have been made in God's image, it should be enough for us as well.

This means that our mission is to do the best that we can. Of course there are going to be times when we make mistakes, and we need to give ourselves permission to do this. When I meet with B'nai Mitzvah students, I usually ask them if there is any part of the service that they are nervous about. And almost always, they say that they are scared they are going to forget part of a prayer or mess up the Hebrew when they are reading from the Torah.

I always say, "So what?"

They are caught off guard by this response and usually say something like, "It'll be so embarrassing."

You see, even at a young age we push ourselves towards perfection and feel so ashamed when we make a mistake.

So then I ask them if they think God cares if they forget a tune or botch a word.

And they think about it and they say, "No."

"What do you think that God cares about the day of your Bar or Bat Mitzvah? Does God care if you are perfect?"

And they then say, "I guess what God really cares about is if I try my best."

I reply, "That is exactly right. All that God and I and your parents want is for you to go up there, put your heart into it and do the best that you can. And if you make a mistake, we will still be proud of you."

It is so important that these kids know that we love them, and God loves them, with their imperfections and all.

The truth is that all of us have imperfections. We just need to convince ourselves that we are allowed to admit our shortcomings. In fact, the Torah and the rest of the Bible lets us know that this is what we should do. In these sacred texts, our ancestors' imperfections are constantly revealed to us. And many of them have huge imperfections, much larger than any of ours. But the message we get is that though they are flawed, God still loves them. For my rabbinic thesis, I focused on King David. I have always been drawn to him as he is one of the most complex characters that we have. Though he tries to live a life that is good and that is in service of God, there are times when he really misses the mark. The most famous story is when he goes astray and commits adultery with a married woman, Bathsheba, and then plots to have her husband killed. This is a major sin that he has committed! But God, being merciful and compassionate, is able to forgive him. In fact, the rabbis tell a story that says when King David is about to die, God tells him that every day of his life has been dear to him - even the days when he was less than perfect. This means that God continues to love him at all times. For, God knows that King David is only human. If God is able to accept King David with his major flaws, then certainly God must be willing to tolerate the errors that we make.

At this time of the year, we ask God to do that. We admit our faults, and pray that God will have mercy on us. But as we ask this from God, we must also have the courage to be more forgiving and a little gentler with ourselves. We must acknowledge that we are human and will make mistakes. And when we do, we shouldn't be angry at ourselves and beat ourselves up. Instead, we should think about where we went wrong. This does not mean that we should dwell and replay the incidents in our head over and over again. But we should reflect on them and see if there is anything to be learned. We should look at our mistakes as opportunities to improve upon ourselves. We should learn from them so that we can grow and change. If God had made us perfect, we never would have the chance to do this.

To be perfect is to be *mushlam*. Within this word you hear the root *shin-lamed-mem*. This root is familiar because we find it in words like *shalom* – meaning peace – and *shalem* – meaning wholeness. I think that this is ironic because when we give up our pursuit of perfection, we will find that our lives will be filled with more peace and more wholeness. I believe that when God created the world, this is what God hoped for us. Instead of constantly criticizing and critiquing ourselves, our goal in this coming year should be to accept and embrace ourselves. We should be willing to acknowledge our entire selves. This means recognizing our flaws, but also focusing on all that is good about us and our lives. For when we are able to do this, I think that

we will find that we are on our way to becoming- maybe not the perfect version - but certainly the best versions of ourselves. Ken Yehi Ratzon. May this be God's will.