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Sermon for the 2nd Day of Rosh Hashanah

A story is told about Rabbi Elazar ben Shimon. One day, he was coming home from a lesson with his master. He was smiling and whistling as he rode. It had been a great day. Not only had he learned a lot of Torah from his teacher, but he had been complimented by him as they were studying. Rabbi Elazar was so proud of himself. As he happily went on his way, he noticed a man coming towards him. When he got closer, he saw that this man was ugly. In fact, it was the ugliest person that he had ever laid eyes upon. The man approached Rabbi Elazar and said to him, "Shalom Aleichem. Peace be upon you, my teacher." But Rabbi Elazar, taken aback by the man's appearance, did not return the kind greeting. Instead he said, "*Reika!* Empty one! You are so ugly! Are all of the people of your city as ugly as you are? The man thought for a second and replied, "I don't know. But if you don't like my appearance, go and tell the craftsman who made me. Say to Him: How ugly is that vessel that you made!"¹

We too are obsessed with the vessel. We spend so much time focusing on physical appearances. Most of us keep mirrors in almost every room so that we can constantly check and assess how we look. This is not just true in the privacy of our own homes. Has anybody ever been in an elevator that has mirrors? The temptation is too much! It's impossible to stop yourself from taking a peek. And when we view ourselves, we see the same thing as Rabbi Elazar. We don't see a holy vessel. We don't see an individual who has been made in God's image. When we look into a mirror, all that we can see are our imperfections. We notice the new grey hairs sticking up, those bags under our eyes, the extra pounds that are hanging over our jeans. Why is it that we are so hard on ourselves and critical of the way we look?

I got some insight into this question this summer, as I had the opportunity to go to Camp Coleman in Cleveland, Georgia, where despite a swine flu shortened summer, nearly forty Temple Beth El kids were campers. As a member of the faculty, one of my responsibilities was to create a program for the 10th grade campers. I decided that I wanted to do something about body image as I know it is a critical topic for kids this age. My session was called the session, "I Feel Fat Today," and was geared towards the teenage girls. I handed them each a piece of paper that had the same question on it, "If you could change one part of your body, what would you change?" Without missing a beat, at least a handful of the girls yelled out, "You mean we can only pick one thing?!" I said, "Yes, one thing." The answers that I got back were what I expected. Some said that they would have smaller thighs, a smaller waist, bigger chest, clearer skin, cuter nose, and more toned arms.

What was wrong with them the way that they were? Why did they hate what they saw when they looked in the mirror? The problem was, they explained, that they didn't look the way they thought they were supposed to. They didn't look like the other sixteen year old girls that they see on their television shows and in the magazines they read. They didn't look like some of the other girls in the bunk. And sadly enough, they said that they didn't look the way that their parents wanted them to. One girl told a story of a time she was trying on clothes in a dressing room with her mother. She put on a dress and said, "Ugh, I am getting so fat." Her mother's response, "You are! You're so much bigger than your friends. You need to lose some weight." These were such hurtful words for a mother to say to her daughter. Yet words like these are used all of the time, between parents and children, husbands and wives, friends and even acquaintances. Our society places an enormous amount of stress on our physical appearances and we compare ourselves and each other to what we think is the ideal standard.

Last spring, our Sisterhood had a program where we watched a documentary called, "The Tribe," which traces the history of the Barbie doll. Believe it or not, Barbie was actually the creation of a Jewish-American woman, named Ruth Handler. I don't have to tell you about Barbie's popularity. She's a

¹ Taanit 20a-b (Babylonian Talmud)

cultural icon - but she is completely unrealistic. If she were a person, she would be 5'6", weigh 110 pounds, and have a 39 inch bust and an 18 inch waist.² If Barbie were a person, she probably couldn't even walk. And many of the celebrities we see in print and on screen have what we think are ideal body types, so we assume they should be the standard. So we – and I am not just talking about sixteen year old girls - go to extremes to try to look like them and the other "perfect" people we see around us.

How do we do this? We keep scales in our bathrooms or bedrooms so that we can constantly weigh in. We go on diets and we exercise. While there are benefits to these practices, we often take them too far. Some diets are actually forms of starvation. I am not a nutritionist but I know that eating only grapefruit for a week cannot be sufficient. And when we diet too much, it can affect our mood. We become tired and irritable. Extreme dieting can also just take the joy out of eating. As Jews, we know that food is important. We bless food as it is a gift from God and we use it to enhance our holiday celebrations. Think of the meals we eat on Shabbat, Passover, and Hanukkah. We use food to make our holiday rituals special. As for exercise, for many of us, are pushing ourselves too hard. We work out even when we are injured or exhausted. The other day I went to a Pilates class at seven in the morning after having been up late the night before. Pilates is a mat class so at one point I was lying down and I shut my eyes for a second. I literally started to drift off - and it was then that I realized that this is crazy. If I am tired, I should take a day off. I shouldn't have to feel guilty if I skip a day.

Trying to get the ideal body is hard work and it's never ending. Once you achieve one goal, you find another problem area to start working on. And when we are always looking at how other people look, we are always finding new things that we want to change about our appearances. What do we think will happen once do this? Maybe we think that our lives will be different. We think that we will be better off. Everything will be easier and we'll be happier. But if we stop and think about it, we realize that this doesn't make sense. Let's think about Rabbi Elazar. When the man approached him, he screamed, "*Reika!*" This means empty one. He assumed that a person with an ugly exterior was worthless, that he was empty inside. But we know that you can be empty inside even if you have a great physical appearance. You can have the body that everybody wants and on the inside you can be falling apart. Having a good body doesn't protect a person from parenting woes, marital problems, or economic troubles.

Having this sort of body doesn't even ensure that you will have perfect health. We can only control our bodies to a certain degree. As we age, gravity comes and even though we try to fight it, we are powerless to it. We get wrinkles, lose hair, find that our hearing and eyesight are diminishing. There is also disease. Though we have hope that we will one day be able to prevent them, there are many sicknesses that grab hold of our bodies regardless of what we do with them. Am I saying that we should stop working out? That we should eat whatever we want whenever we want? That there is no point and we should stop caring? Of course not, we should pursue a healthy lifestyle. Our tradition teaches that our body is a holy vessel – it is a house for our soul. We need to care about our physical health, but we shouldn't be consumed by it. When we live in a way where we obsess over our body image all the time, we are not really living at all. In fact, we are sacrificing our soul in order to take care of our body.

Rosh Hashanah is a time where we are called to engage in a process called *Cheshbon HaNefesh*. This means that we are to take an accounting of our souls. When we do this, I think that we will see that we need to do more to nourish our souls. In the story of Creation which we read this morning, we learn that God formed humans from the dust of the Earth, but God did not stop there. God breathed into us the soul of life, and because of this, we became living beings.³ It is the soul that makes us who we are. If God had wanted to, God could have made each of us the same. But God did not make us duplicates of one another. We must embrace this special part of ourselves. We have been so focused on our facades that we have been neglecting our spirits.

We must find ways to renew our souls. Judaism gives us the chance to nourish our souls in many ways, such as through the study of Torah. In the Book of Exodus we learn that after the Israelites

² According to Dr. Kelly Brownell, Director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University.

³ Genesis 2:7.

crossed the Red Sea, they traveled through the desert for three days and could not find water. One interpretation says that the water in this case was really Torah. What the Israelites thirsted for were the words of Torah. More than water for their bodies, they needed Torah for their souls.⁴ We do too. We need to make time for the study of Torah. It's different than reading the newspaper or the Internet, because we connect to the stories of our ancestors. We get to understand their experiences and apply them to our own. This type of study takes effort. Reading Torah is an exercise of its own. My professor, Dr. Norman Cohen, says that this is because it forces us to be involved. It forces us to respond and to be self-reflective. As we open our hearts, minds, and souls to the biblical text, the text reflects back to us own struggles.⁵ We can learn about ourselves through the study of Torah. We can figure out who we are and who we want to be.

If only we spent one hour studying Torah for every hour that we spent at the gym! Because through Torah we also gain wisdom about how to live. Torah is filled with laws and commandments that can guide us. The Torah contains 613 commandments – 365 of which are negative (the ones that say Thou Shalt Not) and 248 which are positive (the ones that say, You Shall). These numbers have meaning. The 365 correspond to the days of the year, while the 248 represent the limbs of the body. This means that when we serve God it has to be all of the time with all of our being. With all of our being means that we have to use our bodies *and* our souls. Oftentimes, when we do something that is good for our souls it just happens that it is good for our bodies too. Think about when we participate in activities that fulfill the command of *Tikkun Olam*, healing the world. Every year, one of the Temple's groups, the Giving Tree, has a Christmas Eve program. We go to Pearl City in East Boca Raton, and go from house to house to deliver gifts to low income families. We are on our feet for hours as we haul the presents and carry the turkeys. We work up a sweat doing this as there is some real physical exertion involved. But our souls also get exercise. We get to feel a sense of purpose as we bring these families food and presents. There is also the satisfaction we feel knowing that we are bringing them hope and joy. As we come into their house and get to know them, it often helps us realize how blessed we are. We get a new perspective on life. I know that when I leave, I am moved. I am thankful to God. In a year that has been so difficult for so many, it feels good when we can find reasons to be grateful.

And it is through prayer that we are able to express our appreciation. But more than that, when we pray and meditate we have the opportunity to connect with God. Instead of looking in the mirror, we have to take the time to stop and look inside. When we do this we may find that we are able to hear our own voice. But our voice is not just our own. In our voice is God's voice. In our soul is God. Our souls were created by God, so inside each one of us is a divine spark. In our morning prayers, we say: *Elohai Neshama Shenatata Bi Tehora He*. My God, the soul You have given me is pure. You created it. You formed it. You breathed it into me, and You sustain it within in me.⁶ Our bodies are truly holy vessels and that is because of the spirit that dwells within us. We must care for our bodies, but we must also make ourselves aware of our spirit. We must nurture it so that we can keep it healthy. When we do this, I believe that we will find that we are able to bring more meaning and more purpose into our lives. Certainly this is what God, the One who created us, intended. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*. May this be God's will.

⁴ Cohen, Norman, Ph.D. "The Study of Torah." The Jewish Lights Spirituality Book. p. 215.

⁵ Ibid. "Midrash: Sacred Stories." p. 228.

⁶ As read in *Mishkan Tefilah*.