

Sermon for Yom Kippur  
October 7-8, 2011 - 10 Tishri, 5772  
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton  
Rabbi Daniel Levin

I want to tell you the story of Michael Levin.<sup>1</sup> Michael, no relation to me, was born on February 17, 1984 and grew up in Philadelphia. He was a very typical suburban Jewish kid. His friends and teachers described him as sweet, funny, humble, kind, and loving, who loved life and wanted to live it to the fullest. He loved sports, and was a huge Philadelphia Phillies fan.

Michael spent summers at Camp Ramah in the Poconos, and in high school became active in his synagogue youth group. As many young people from Temple Beth El have done, Michael spent two months at the Alexander Muss High School in Israel, and was deeply moved by the stories he learned of Jewish heroes - Judah Maccabi, Rabbi Akiva, Hannah Senesh, Eli Cohen, and Yoni Netanyahu.

After another year in Israel after high school Michael decided to make Aliyah. In his yearbook, he wrote, "you can't fulfill your dreams unless you dare to risk it all."

Michael moved to a kibbutz and was drafted into the IDF. When he arrived at the induction center, he was told that his papers were not in order, and that he would not be able to begin his service. So Michael went outside and around to the side of the building, climbed up on a dumpster, and snuck into a window on the second floor of the building. When the officer saw him, he hollered "No one can get through the front door here without papers." Michael simply smiled at him and said, "What makes you think I came through the front door?" The officer shrugged and Michael was processed. Later he said, "I've been here at the Army Induction Center for twenty years. Some kids don't want to be here and look for ways to get out. Michael was the first kid I ever met who 'broke in' to the Israeli Defense Forces."

Michael volunteered to serve in the paratroops, one of the most demanding and challenging assignments. Life was even more difficult as a "Lone Soldier" with no family in Israel. In July of 2006, Michael was given a 30-day leave to return home to visit his family in Philadelphia. During the visit, a cross-border raid by Hizbullah drew Israel into war with Lebanon.

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<sup>1</sup> Yossi Katz, *A Voice Called: Stories of Jewish Heroism*, Jerusalem: Gefen, 2010, pp. 195-201.

Despite his commander's insistence, Michael cut short his visit home and returned to his unit. On August 1, 2006, in the Lebanese village of Aita al-Shaab, Michael's unit came under attack and Michael was killed by a Hizbullah sniper.

Two days later, as Michael's family was riding up into Jerusalem for the funeral at the Mt. Herzl military cemetery, Michael's father wondered if there would even be a minyan. When they arrived at the cemetery, there were literally thousands of people who had gathered from all across the country. They came to pay their respects to this young man whose character shone as a beacon of what they all shared as the foundation of their belief.

I think of Michael's story on this Yom Kippur, not simply because of the tragedy of his death, but because of the inspiration I draw from his life. His mother remarked that Michael was just a normal American Jewish kid. "You know," she said, "he wasn't always an angel ... at times he made mistakes and could get into trouble." But Michael had character. He knew what he believed in. He had a sense of what God and his people expected of him. And he was committed to making his life a reflection of the core of his belief.

What is character? James Davison Hunter teaches religion, culture, and social theory at the University of Virginia. In his book *The Death of Character*, he writes that "Character is formed in relation to convictions and is manifested in the capacity to abide by those convictions, even in, especially in, the face of temptation."<sup>2</sup> Michael didn't have to move to Israel all by himself, he didn't have to force his way into the IDF, he didn't have to return to Israel to fight with his unit in Lebanon. Yet he did all these things because of a calling, because of a grounded sense of who he was and what he believed. He knew what he was living for because he knew what he was willing to die for.

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What do you believe? It seems a fairly simple question, and yet Yom Kippur is a day to think about character -- our character. Today we are asked to think about what we believe in, what is the meaning of the priorities we have set for our lives, and why we value what we value. Today we are asked to take the full measurement of our lives and ask how we measure up.

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<sup>2</sup> James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character*, New York: Basic Books, 2000, p xiii.

But what happens if we have no yardstick by which to measure ourselves? Can we assess the value of our lives and our decisions if we have no strong sense of our values? And can our values have any meaning if we have no underlying sense of what makes them valuable? What do you believe? WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

The fact is, in our day and age, most of us simply don't know. Christian Smith who teaches religion and society at the University of Notre Dame recently authored a study of what he calls emerging adults, people aged 18-23, in his new book: *Lost In Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. His studies show that there exists among emerging adults a painful and dangerous gap in their education: they have not learned how to make a moral choice. Like most adult Americans, Smith says that "emerging adult thinking about morality is not particularly consistent, coherent, or articulate."<sup>3</sup>

When asked to make a moral judgment, or to define what they believe, an alarming percentage of emerging adults profess a moral individualism, a sense that morality is defined by each person for him/herself. For example, in speaking with an Ivy league student about the morality of cheating, one young woman said, "I don't know ... I guess that's a decision that everyone is entitled to make for themselves."<sup>4</sup> Another young woman was asked where her understanding of morality came from: "I don't know," she said. "I have no idea ... where I came up with like just a lot of my views of right and wrong... it just kind of came outta thin air."

Fully one in three of the emerging adults Smith and his colleagues studied said "they simply did not know what makes anything morally right or wrong." One person explained: "My brain just automatically screams 'No, stealing is wrong, even if it doesn't hurt anybody, that's wrong, you can't do that.' It's just, I don't know, when I actually think about it, I don't really know why. I honestly don't really have much of an answer for that." Some said they figured out what was right or wrong based on what other people in their orbit would think of that action - what would my parents say, or what would my boyfriend think. Still others said right and wrong was determined by what outcomes would follow from a particular course of action. And others said right and wrong is based on whether something would hurt other people.

In order to make a moral judgment, we have to be able to anchor our morality in something larger than just want feels

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<sup>3</sup> Christian Smith, et. al. *Lost In Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

right at the time. Our sense of right and wrong needs to come from somewhere, somewhere larger than just what we think or feel at a given moment, somewhere more transcendent than what our gut or instinct tells us.

But as Jews we have an anchor. We have a creed and a code that provides a true grounding for our moral bearing. That anchor is called Torah.

What is Torah? For many of us, we think of Torah as a book of anachronistic stories that make no sense, and laws that apply to another age. But Torah is more. Much, much more.

As Jews we have a gift of a moral code that comes from somewhere. It comes from a place divine and authentic. It comes from a sense of the transcendent our people has sought to share over nearly four thousand years. It teaches that there is a force in the universe that unites all life and being into one web of relation, awesome and sublime. It teaches that life is of infinite value, and that there lives in each of us a spirit and soul, transcendent and divine, that gives us the capacity to perceive meaning in life, to understand that there is a moral order to the universe, to discern right from wrong, and good from evil. The eternal truths that are woven in it help us to unravel the complexities of the world in which we live, and guide the decisions that fall to us to make.

We used to live in a world where knowledge of Torah was everything. Our people used to consider knowledge of Torah as the pinnacle of virtue, as a personal necessity, as something of highest priority and ultimate value. But in the modern era, as we sought to integrate into the larger culture, we replaced Torah with other values. We found it more useful to know science and mathematics, to know the arts and the humanities, to know the law, business, and economics.

And we have been incredibly successful in these new disciplines. No ethnic group has become more accomplished in the professions and the sciences than we. The Nobel prize has been awarded to more than 800 individuals, and more than 20 percent of the recipients are Jews. Just this year, in 2011, Ralph Marvin Steinman and Bruce Beutler were awarded the prize in Physiology or Medicine, Saul Perlmutter and Adam Riess were awarded the prize in Physics, and Dan Shechtman was awarded the prize in Chemistry. Jewish people have climbed to the top of the world in business, the arts, law, and entertainment.

But in our pursuit of these noble and worthy endeavors, in our quest for ever greater secular success, we started to think of the Torah as just another book. And once we stopped studying

Torah, in many ways we lost our sense of who we are, where we come from, and what we ultimately believe.

In the Torah portion we will read tomorrow/today, Moses implores us to take hold of Torah. "For this commandment that I command you today - it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who can ascend to heaven for us and take it for us, so that we can learn it and do it? (Deut. 30:11-12)"

Moses tells us that the Torah is not distant, but we have chosen to distance ourselves from Torah. The conscious decision we have made to be functionally illiterate when it comes to our tradition is tragic - our deliberate insistence on passing that illiteracy on to our children is sinful.

My sister is a professor of math education who works with the Salt River Pima Maricopa Indian Community Schools near Phoenix, Arizona. She is among an extraordinary team of educators who come to the reservation to share their passion for the value of comprehensive education. And despite all their efforts, there persists among the native Americans a frustrating resistance to adopt these values. They deliberately choose a path towards truancy, which leads to generational illiteracy and lack of basic facility in math and science.

There are some exceptions, and my sister is inspired every day by the students who come eager to learn. But from the outside we look at this and ask: "what's wrong with these people? How can they condemn their children and themselves to a life of functional illiteracy?"

I would ask the same question of us. What's wrong with us? When we as a community believe so strongly in secular education and literacy, how can we accept for ourselves a life of functional illiteracy when it comes to the foundations of our belief and morality, and worse, why do we condemn our children to the same illiteracy from which we suffer?

It's important for us to be educated in math, science, humanities and the arts. We need our children to be the next generation of innovators, scientists, engineers, mathematicians, writers, artists, doctors, lawyers, and businesspeople. We need our children to be able to compete in an ever more competitive world.

But even though we do so much to prepare our children to meet the world, Smith says most emerging adults today feel lost. They are not morally degenerate, they do not seek to ignore the question of morality, but, he says, "they simply are a people deprived, a generation that has been failed, when it comes to

moral formation. They have had withheld from them something that every person deserves to have a chance to learn: how to think, speak, and act well on matters of good and bad, right and wrong."<sup>5</sup>

What we withhold from our children, we also withhold from ourselves. How many of us could answer the questions posed to these young people with any more clarity than they. Do we really know what makes something right or wrong? Can you describe where you formed your understanding of morality? Is your life grounded in Torah?

People need to be able to think coherently about moral beliefs and problems, and to explain why they believe what they believe. We need to be able to carry on a basic, constructive discussion about moral differences with people who disagree. We need to understand and embrace values and purposes in life that transcend the mass-consumerist acquisition of material belongings, instantaneous entertainment, and fleeting fun. We need to learn to "... develop and enjoy loving relationships in community, to pursue spiritual truths and values as best as we can understand them, to learn contentment and generosity, to spend ourselves in service to the well-being of other people. Too often we focus almost exclusively on materialistic consumption and financial security as the guiding stars of their lives, with little care about, or investment in, the larger world beyond the perimeter of self concern. And that is a problem."<sup>6</sup>

Hunter writes that if we want a renewal of character, then we need to renew a commitment to a creed that "constrains, limits, binds, obligates, and compels." As Jews, our creed is Torah. We need to engage that creed, study it, wrestle with it, pound on it, argue with it, and thereby internalize its wisdom learn it. And the more we internalize its wisdom, the more we will hear the voice of God, its author, speak to us from within. That commanding voice will direct each of us to make choices that are grounded in what's right, to make ethical decisions always on behalf of the common good and the discipline to never waver from our principles.

In the Talmud Rabbi Nehorai teaches that we must journey to a place of Torah<sup>7</sup>, and do not say that it will follow you. This year we must start that journey. We need to stop smirking uncomfortably when we realize our illiteracy, and push ourselves to grab hold of Torah.

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<sup>5</sup> Op. cit. Smith, p. 69.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit. Smith pp. 8-10.

<sup>7</sup> Shabbat 147b

This year, as we continue our congregation's project of writing a new Torah Scroll, I encourage everyone to seize the opportunity to take hold of Torah. Let this year be one in which we take Torah seriously.

It is just simply not fair or right to ask 13 year-old Jewish children if they want to pursue their Jewish education, any more than it is fair or right to ask 13 year-old native American children if they want to pursue their secular education. They are simply not equipped to make that choice, and it is irresponsible for us to ask. Jewish education must continue so long as any kind of education continues. It is more important that our children develop morality and character than that they learn to shoot a basketball or kick a soccer ball.

And we need to get out of our heads the idea that Judaism is just for kids. No matter who we are, or how old we are, we need to make time for Torah. Rabbi Akiva became one of the greatest sages in our history, and at the age of 40 he didn't know an Aleph from a Bet. There are so many opportunities to advance our Jewish knowledge, at Temple Beth El, and around our community. Every Saturday morning at 9:30, Temple Beth El offers a basic class in Torah study. No previous knowledge is required to participate. Throughout the year, Temple Beth El will offer opportunities for study and spiritual learning. Sign up. Make Torah a priority. In the Pirke Avot, our sage Hillel said: "Do not say I will study when I have leisure - you may never have that leisure."<sup>8</sup>

As Hunter writes, "Implicit in the word 'character' is a story. It is a story about living for a purpose that is greater than the self. Though this purpose resides deeply within, its origins are outside the self, and so it beckons one forward, channeling one's passions to mostly quiet acts of devotion, heroism, sacrifice, and achievement."<sup>9</sup>

On this Yom Kippur 5772, as begin a new chapter in the book of life, may it be that the characters we each embody be schooled in Torah, imbued with purpose, grounded with meaning, and blessed with peace.

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<sup>8</sup> Pirke Avot 2:4

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. Hunter, p. 226.