

Yom Kippur Sermon 2005
Divinity Has Many Forms
By Rabbi Michael Schwab

“Attention all passengers. We are about to make our final descent to our destination. Please be sure that all trays and seatbacks are in their upright position. We should be on the ground in just a few minutes. Local time in Holland is 11:02 am. Thank you for traveling with us and have a nice stay in Holland’. HOLLAND??!! What do you mean Holland? I thought I was on the plane to Italy! There must be some kind of mistake. All my life I’ve dreamed of going to Italy. I have a set of guidebooks and have made wonderful plans. I have even learned some handy phrases in Italian. I am supposed to meet all of my friends in Italy. We have been planning this for years! Stewardess, captain -- Can someone help me??!!”

This vignette was used by Emily Perl Kingsley as the introduction to her essay, “Welcome To Holland”, which tries to paint a picture of how it feels when parents first discover that they have a child with acute special needs. Kingsley wrote that all of her life she had dreamed and imagined a certain future for her family: typical family trips to the beach and vacations to Disney world, heart to heart talks with her children, watching them as they won a trophy for their baseball prowess or were recognized for an outstanding performance at a dance recital, following along their academic success until that time when they chose a career and became independent, as well as one day watching them as they found a marriage partner and started a family of their own. Then in one difficult moment that course was altered and a new destination was set before her. It became clear very quickly that few of those dreams would ever come true and even the ones that remained certainly would not be fulfilled in the way she had originally imagined. Suddenly, her life’s path had diverged from the rest of the people she knew. This realization, she wrote, was painful and difficult. In fact, she believes, that it is a blow from which many families who discover that they have children with special needs, never recover. Metaphorically they continue to pine for Italy even though they are inextricably entrenched in Holland.

Many of us have had similar experiences, when life takes a turn we never anticipated. Dealing with such major changes is difficult and stressful. Yet we must not understate the specific difficulties these families endure to simply make it through each day without throwing up their hands in frustration and breaking down in tears. Therefore, on a holiday like Yom Kippur when we look at ourselves and the world with a critical eye, searching for self-improvements and ways to make the world better for everyone, I feel it is important to share with you a world that you may not know; a world of roller-coaster emotions, countless frustrations, endless tears as well as a world of strength, courage, inspiration and love. In sharing with you the stories of families with members that have acute special needs, I want you to see what their life is like from the inside to both sensitize you to a growing population of people that are often unfortunately invisible in our communities in order to raise awareness in the hope that we can be more supportive. However I also share with you these stories to inspire you and teach you, on a day of the year when we are supposed to clarify our priorities, the unique and powerful lessons

about life that people with special needs and their families can give to us.

My wife works with children with autism and the stories she brings home on a daily basis have opened my eyes to the tremendous amount of difficulty that families in which at least one member has substantial special needs, encounter daily. Many of these children have multiple disabilities that inhibit their ability to fully understand the world around them and which substantially prevent them from integrating into our society. They may not be able to communicate properly or talk at all. In fact some may never form a complete sentence. They may not be able to have control of their limbs and move about freely or even ever go the bathroom without aid. They may not be able to express emotions properly or understand basic instructions or comments directed to them by others, including their own parents. As you can imagine, each and every one of these things cause both the children and their family members a tremendous amount of frustration, heartache and angst.

This pain is multiplied by the ignorance, rejection and insensitivities these families endure on a regular basis from people who do not take the time to understand their issues or who do not care enough to make the extra effort to be kind, supportive or inclusive. These children are gaped at by passers-by, reprimanded rudely by strangers for their atypical behavior, excluded from activities because of lack of foresight or lack of resources and even short-changed by many of their own schools which are staffed with teachers not properly trained to meaningfully educate these children. Everyday these families face a series of obstacles in life that those who have developed typically rarely, if ever, face.

Once a rabbi sent me a description of a conversation she had with a young girl who had been born with wholly undeveloped legs and was wheelchair bound. From her words I caught a small glimpse of a life very different from what I knew, a life filled with barriers and challenges, experiences of having to confront daily doors that she couldn't open and curbs that she couldn't navigate. What stands out in my mind is how she talked about the seemingly simple task of getting into her public school building. She would arrive at the door, and then have to wait until someone able bodied opened it for her. She hated that. It was an assault to her sense of self, to her dignity. 'They've offered to have a back door for me, with a handicapped sign on it,' she said, 'but I don't want to have to go in through the back door. And I don't want the label on it. I want to go in the front door, under my own power, the same as everyone else.'" Being disabled can often mean being excluded and separated in the most basic ways. Having to deal with that is a heavy burden for anyone to bear, especially a child.

Rabbi Brad Artson, the Dean of the Zeigler Rabbinical School at the University of Judaism in LA, has a child with autism named Jacob. He has written a great deal about his experience as a father of a child with acute special needs, including the challenges he has faced in dealing with the atypical behaviors and communication problems of his son. He tells the story of the first Shabbat after he switched positions from his role as congregational rabbi to dean of the Zeigler School, which was done in part so he could spend more time with his son. He wrote, "Now freed from my obligation to arrive at

services early, I looked forward to savoring the early Shabbat morning walk to our new synagogue with my son. On our first Sabbath there, I tried to walk the way most other people walk. I wanted to arrive punctually. Jacob, on the other hand, was already where he wanted to be: enjoying a walk with his father”. He seemed to have no sense that this walk had any particular destination and refused to walk with any speed or in any purposeful direction. “I cajoled, pulled, pushed, yelled, but Jacob would not rush. I told him we were going to miss services, and still he strolled. I insisted that he hurry, and he paused to explore a patch of flowers, or sat himself down in the warm morning sun. I tried grabbing his hand and pulling him by force. I tried walking behind him and pushing with my knees. Nothing worked. By the time we arrived at the synagogue, hopelessly late, my stomach was in knots. I was drenched in sweat, and far too frustrated to pray”.

This anecdote could describe any parent who has traveled anywhere with a child with certain special needs: trip to the grocery store, to school or even just to a different room in the house. The fact that a child with autism sees the world so differently makes it very difficult to deal with such a child when we expect them to function in our practical reality. This can wear down and frustrate any parent who has to deal with this on an on-going basis. That is why it is so important that when you see a scene like this: be sensitive. Be understanding. Recognize the rhyme and reason of what is happening and look for an opportunity to help instead of judging them or acting in way that will make matters worse. These families already struggle with more pain and frustration on a daily basis than anyone deserves, they should not have to add to that pain because of the insensitivity of others.

However, even while Rabbi Artson described the extreme difficulties of having a son with autism he also recognized that his very same son is his teacher as well. He continued, “I realized that something had to give. Jacob wasn't going to stop being Jacob, which meant that our walk [to synagogue] would have to proceed his way, on his schedule . . . I would learn to walk the way Jacob walked. I abandoned any commitment to schedule or pace. When I got to the corner, I didn't let myself look at the light. [Strangely] Walking like this, I [began to] feel life's vitality infusing my own, making this very walk a celebration. The sunshine streamed into my soul, God bestowing life and love without conditions or restraint. As I walked, . . . the egglike flowers of the dogwood trees seemed to gesture the words of the psalmist, "How manifold are your works, O Lord. In wisdom have you made them all' . . . From time to time, I just turned to relish my son's meandering. His joy was contagious: the pure delight of a little boy with his father and with time. And his joy was pure. My son cannot read, yet through his very presence, I could now see, affirmed the words of Ecclesiastes that "there is nothing better than for one to rejoice in what he is doing." When we finally did arrive at the synagogue . . . Jacob squealed with delight, "The Torah! The Torah!" and ran to the front of the sanctuary. Too excited to stand still, he bounced on his toes next to the person holding the Scroll. More than any sermon I've ever heard or given, I owe the fullness of the Shabbat to my son. Jacob taught me through his own example that we can't possibly be late, because, wherever we are, we are already where we are supposed to be. Our minds just have to acknowledge what our heart already knows. Jacob has taught me how to walk with God. In that art, Jacob is my teacher, my master, my Rebbe.”

Most of us have a Jacob in our lives. They may not be our children but a friend's child, a grandchild, a niece, a sister or a cousin. They may not be a child at all but someone who has a condition that has challenged them in life and gives them an especially unique perspective on the world. Brad Artson's Jacob has many issues and dealing with those issues is taxing on both him and his family. Yet Jacob taught his father a profound lesson -- to appreciate the moment and celebrate life's gifts, in the here and now, with joy. Often our interactions with these special individuals who approach the world differently than we, have an enormous impact on who we are and how we look at life.

I too have a Jacob and his name is David. He was my cousin. I say was because he died from complications resulting from cerebral palsy about 5 years ago. He was about 18 years old when he died. He was confined to a wheel chair and was often sick or in pain. Helping to make his life as happy and fulfilling as possible was a 24-hour a day affair that required an endless amount of energy from my aunt and uncle. They certainly had not planned for life to take that course. I remember that traveling to family simchas, which the rest of our family did automatically in droves, was a huge affair for them. They had to deal with the various degrees of handicapped accessible provisions in all sorts of places, which was a nightmare, and making David feel included once they had finally managed to get him to a certain place was always a conscious effort. Tending to David was difficult, frustrating and often times heart breaking.

Yet, David gave back something very special to our entire family. In his short life he accomplished more than many, for in a brief time he taught everyone with whom he came into contact, some of the most valuable lessons there are to be learned. Most importantly though, he reminded us in a very personal and powerful way that the image of God in human beings comes in all kinds of packages. Meeting David meant learning that the human spirit, that part of us that comes from God, is present in all types, in every kind of human body. He taught everyone who took the time to know him that the most recognizable differences between people are actually the most insubstantial. We are all made of the same stuff: we all have thoughts, both lofty and base, we have emotions that can be hurt or uplifted, we have dreams and goals, needs and wants and each of us shares a soul that strives for something beyond. David, in the way he lived his life, changed how people saw their fellow souls on this earth -- a task that many a rabbi can only hope to accomplish in life.

I have realized that while it may seem odd to some, my disabled, non-verbal cousin was a tremendous role model for me, as he can be for all of us -- especially during the High Holiday season when we are required to repent and work on bettering ourselves. You see, David experienced life in way that few others do -- his survival, almost his every need, throughout his entire existence was dependant on the goodwill and kindness of others. He was constantly in need of help. And from a very young age, David naturally understood that it was OK, even good, to accept this help from others. He innately grasped how fragile life is, and how much God and others were essential to making life happen. He did not fight it nor, in the balance, did he resent it.

Therefore, David always brought out the love and kindness in everyone else and he was always then ready to accept that love with appreciation and a smile. How many times do we sit next to a person we love and are unable, or unwilling, to express it? How many times are we even unable to accept love, even the love that others offer us readily and easily? But, David never grew arrogant enough, or conversely, never became insecure enough, to hurt others and reject love, for he understood the limitations we each possess and the imperfections we all have and thus the utter necessity for each of us to experience an abundance of love and kindness in order to live a happy life. He understood that to live was to be loved by others and to love others in return.

What a tremendous lesson to learn on Yom Kippur, a day in which we focus on our imperfections. How often do we shrug-off our own faults and mistakes and attempt to project an image that we are perfect? How often do we beat ourselves up for our flaws and errors, eating away at our self-image because we expect from ourselves perfection? However, David, Jacob and others like them teach us that while repenting for our sins is necessary, we must also remember the ultimate lesson: that to be human is to be imperfect and thus we need God and others to help us live fulfilling and meaningful lives. That is why we have Yom Kippur every year, there is never a time where we have nothing for which to repent. And when we accept the notion that because we are imperfect we must depend on others, we open ourselves up to the ability to love people whole-heartedly, and accept love freely in return. With this in mind we will not grow arrogant and haughty and sin in that way nor will we feel unappreciated and commit wrongs out of frustration and insecurity. As it says in our liturgy on Yom Kippur: “Taaleh Aruchah L’Af Nadaf, Tenachem Al Afar V’Tofer- Bring healing to people who are as helpless as a wind-driven leaf. Have compassion on us who are merely dust and ash”. David taught me what this verse means, that helping others who are in need of healing is a way of giving love but seeing ourselves as people who need help, who are but dust and ash, is what allows us to be loved in return.

Rabbi Avi Weiss of Riverdale, when talking about those with disabilities, spoke of a term he called Spiritual Intelligence. This is an intelligence he said that reaches to the heart of life; it gives us the ability to see what is most important in this world. He believes, as do I, that this is the most important type of intelligence, a type of intelligence possessed in the same abundance, and sometimes in even greater abundance, by those with special needs. He is speaking of the type of intelligence that allowed both Jacob and David to teach their families such profound lessons. To demonstrate spiritual intelligence I would like to share with one more short story, a story that many of you may have heard but one which never ceases to move me: “The scene is the 100-meter dash at the Special Olympics. Nine special athletes lined up in anticipation. When the starting gun went off, eight of the athletes started running as fast as they could. The ninth, however, tripped, fell and started to cry. When the other eight heard his crying, each of them stopped running. In the middle of the race they turned around, went back to him and helped him up. One girl with Down Syndrome kissed him and said, “This will make it better.” Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line.” These children, each one of them, despite or because of their lot in life, knew that making someone feel better and loving one another was far more important than the individual glory of winning any race.

This message of unity and loving-kindness is a crucial one for us to take to heart. The synagogue, for example, the central institution of Judaism, should be a place of comfort and solace to everyone. Judaism at its core recognizes that each person, as a creation of God, has something special to share and that each person has the right to have access to the benefits of the community. In fact, Beit Knesset, the Hebrew word for synagogue, literally means, “A place where people can enter”, it is supposed to be the most open of our institutions. In addition, it is also a sanctuary – literally a place of refuge – refuge from outside worries and anxieties but also at least a partial refuge from the kind of judgment that exists in our everyday lives, especially today on Yom Kippur when we proclaim that God is the only true judge. Wealthy or not so wealthy are equally invited, young or old, male or female, black, white, brown or green, typical or those with special needs – everyone who wishes to participate in their Judaism is welcome in the synagogue.

This notion of acceptance and the inherent value of every human being, comes right out of our classic literature. Our forefather Yitzchak was blind yet a pivotal figure, his son Ya'akov had trouble walking because of his hip, yet became the bearer of our name, Yisrael. Moses, our greatest leader, had a speech impediment. Our Pesach seder speaks about the four different children, all of whom are welcome at the seder and need to be included, even the one who does not know how to ask a question in the same way that the others do. In our Midrash, we are told that at Sinai each person received revelation according to his capacity. Our commentators note that we believe that everyone received God's word in their own unique way. Because of this and because we are each made b'tzelem elokhim, in God's image, we also each share God's glory differently as well.

These differences though are honored in community of compassion. In a Jewish community we share each other's simchas but we also share each other's hardships. Families with children that have special needs are no different, they need our help in dealing with the hardships they endure but they also offer us something special in the way they courageously live their lives and in the unique lessons their children teach us. Each parent, sibling, and child with acute special needs is a hero, an incredible pillar of strength fighting seemingly insurmountable challenges. We must honor them as such and help them carry their burden, just as we help Jews all over the world who struggle with different obstacles in life.

This message of course goes beyond those with special needs. Everyone is someone's Jacob. We must treat all people with special care. We must look beyond their illness, their condition, their faults and their foibles to who they are. Even someone who annoys us terribly, and we all have people like that in our lives, is someone's Jacob and we must remember that they too have a soul and are made in the image of God. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev said that how much people truly love God can be determined by how much they love other people. How true. The Book of Vayikra says without qualification, “Love your fellow as yourself for I am the Lord your God”. It does not say, Love only the fellow whom it is easy for you to love. We truly fulfill the spirit of this verse when we are able to love every fellow, even those that we find harder to love. Thus, we recognize that sometimes it is difficult to deal with the disruption of a child with special needs, as anyone who works with these children can attest, and it is difficult

sometimes to include those whose behaviors we don't understand. However, every time you think that an interaction with such a child is difficult for you, remember how much more difficult it is for that child's parents and for the child himself. In the balance it is clear to me that being tolerant and inclusive as well as making an effort to learn the valuable lessons taught by those who are different from us far outweighs any negative consequences that may be involved.

As a way of concluding I would like to read for you a piece written by the parents of a child with autism, describing why they ran in the Race to Cure Autism. I think it brings much of what I have been saying into perspective: "We RUN for our son. We RUN for a normal life. We RUN to eliminate the stares from others. We RUN because someday we want to go out as a family and not worry about finding a place where he can run, and a place where he can splash . . . We RUN so someday his sister can play with him, rather than next to him. We RUN for all of the families that will learn today what we learned for sure on a cold Chicago winter morning when our son was 2: that our sweet little boy has autism. We RUN because that devastating diagnosis will change lives forever. We RUN because there isn't a cure, but hope of recovery. We RUN because we appreciate the miracles of life that most parents take for granted: his voice, which we wait patiently to hear as words meaningfully strung together in a conversant sentence; his careful and steadied gaze which is still fleeting and without commitment; and his God-given right to play with other children as most 3-year olds should. We RUN to build our resolve in the face of constant and pressing challenges. But most of all, we RUN for our daughter's little brother and our truly amazing son, an unsung hero who doesn't know enough to complain about the hand he was dealt. He works harder than any 3 year-old you will ever know with nearly 30 hours of 1:1 home therapy 7 days/week . . . We will work just as hard for him. We will never give up, nor give in. We love our little man, and we RUN for him". On the Day of Atonement, when we focus on our own faults and imperfections, when we are asked to be humble and non-judgmental, when we recognize that we are all equally creations of God made in God's image, we must pledge to honor all human beings. Our wise tradition gives us words with which to do so in the form of a bracha, a blessing which sanctifies that which we value and lends it holiness. Baruck atah adonai eloheinu melekh olam meshaneheh habriyot, "Blessed are you O Lord Our God whose creations are filled with variety and come in an abundance of forms." May we all live a year in which, in both thought and deed we recognize the Divinity of every life and honor the lessons that each person has to share.

G'mar Hatima Tovah!