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### “The Way of Humanity in Urgent Times”

To describe the transition from childhood to adolescence, we use the term, “Coming of age.” It sounds so neat and tidy, doesn’t it? But between the ages of 13 and 28, when the human brain and body are rapidly developing, the process can be awkward, messy, and imperfect. We’ve all lived through it. We’ve guided children through it. As a rabbi, I’ve guided many children to Torah at age 13. But only a few of them have ever come of age while looking deeply into who they are and what the world around them is about.

One young man comes to mind. In addition to growing physically and emotionally, he thought about how unprepared he was for the world he was eager to know. He was especially confused when his parents told him “Always tell the truth,” though they often told lies to cover that truth. He was also disappointed when he did the right thing but wasn’t rewarded; or worse, when people suffered for no apparent reason at all. He wanted to learn more about the world he was growing into, long before he fully matured. At one time or another, or even to this day, we wanted to know, too. We’ve been taught that “just because we are human, we are prisoners of the years. Yet that very prison is the room of discipline in which we, driven by the urgency of time, create.”

So we ask ourselves, especially at the beginning of the New Year, “Am I where I need to be in my life? Have I used my time well? Have I been faithful to my role as a person in the world of humanity?”

Today, answers to these questions come from long lists of credible authors, podcasters, and influencers. But on the High Holy Days, we look into timeless Jewish sources. We could begin in Torah, but I’d rather begin with a 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish thinker. Though the heart of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seems like a long time ago, in the long history of Jewish thought, it’s still new and awesome.

Dr. Martin Buber was full of Torah knowledge and great insights into the world around him. He was a product of traditional Judaism; he lived during the industrial revolution, two world wars, and reflected on them and the horrors of the Holocaust in his writings. Like us, he wanted to understand what it means to be human, despite obstacles to humanity he observed in his lifetime. His studies led him to believe that the blessing of our own life, intimately related to Jewish faith, is the Way to our greatest humanity.

In his book, “The Way of Humanity,”<sup>i</sup> Buber highlighted the blessing that is life, itself --- to be specific, he was talking about your life and my life! The only life we can live, he taught, is our own. To emulate our mentors and heroes is impossible to do. He wrote:

**Our deeds, even if minimal compared to the deeds of our ancestors, have value in that we have performed them in our own manner and with our own strength.**

When we ask ourselves, “Can I be like her?” “Can I ever be as great as him?” The answer should be, “No.” But it could be, amazingly, “You can do more!” or “You can do it your way.” None of us stands in the shadow of anybody else. We stand on our own. We stand before each other and before God. It’s an impressive place to be, but we’re not unprepared.

Like our mentors and heroes, we possess unique gifts. We discovered them as we grew through adolescence and young adulthood, or as we found our way in work and among family. No one peaks too young unless they’re not interested in growing. If we allow ourselves to grow from experience, we can dig ever deeper to find within us what is there and how to be at our best. We’re taught further:

**With every person, something new is placed into the world, something that has never existed before, something that is original and unique.**

We aren’t substitutes, posers, or phonies. We are original, unique, and the world is waiting for us to address it. In our lifetime we will add to the world something that has never existed before. What will it be?

Though the book of Ecclesiastes begins, “Utter futility! Utter futility! All is futile!” as if to say, “What does it matter?” the rabbis explained, “But now that we’re here we should make a positive difference.” To some, a positive difference will mean finding a cure to a ravaging disease or a pandemic virus. It might mean being the first civilian to land on the moon or maybe, one day, to walk on Mars. But it can also mean being the person whose generous heart liberates another person’s gifts. It can mean that your positive difference might inspire someone else to be better at what they do.

A perfect example is The Alexander Jewish Family Service. At Celebration Company, challenged adults are paid employees who make Shabbat candles, decorated glass plates, and other cherished gifts for Jewish homes. They make a difference every day. In the hands of adults who will never write a dissertation or perform surgery, they nevertheless, learn joyfully and among friends, how to roll wax into Shabbat candles and decorate glass plates. These men and women are making a positive difference with liberated hearts and hands filled with their gifts. They are productive members of the community.

There are other people whose names we read in the headlines because of the wonders they *do* create with their hands. In laboratories and creative work centers, they’re designing lifesaving cures and therapies; they’re leading the way in technology to improve life and living. In places like Israel, significant medical advances are coming for patients with ALS and Parkinson’s. Brilliant and talented scientists are applying their gifts for our sake.

Between those who roll candles and those who provide medical treatments stand those who make other contributions to the world. There is no person without a purpose, a place, or a passion. It's not about chasing pipedreams or visualizing your future for instant results; it's always been about taking the time to appreciate the gift of one's life.

In a recent conversation, a young man told me that circumstances forced him to wrestle with life-changing choices. He loves to teach. To be in the classroom animates him and inspires his lessons. In our conversation, his body language gave away his first love. When he spoke about teaching and how he inspired his students to think about the world, there was no question, but that education would always be part of his future. He also acknowledged that even a decision he made today didn't mean that he couldn't make a new decision in the future. And since he never really failed in the past, why should a carefully made decision cause him to fear failure now? At his age, he could do anything he wanted and make many changes in years still mostly ahead of him.

It reminds me of a recent phone call I had with a young rabbi. He told me that in his first job he was just a "religious school bureaucrat." He moaned that he had to teach children instead of adults. After listening carefully, I said, "We don't always land where we want to be, immediately, but it doesn't mean that you can't work hard and change your direction and your circumstances. And those young Jewish children you're teaching? They'll become young Jewish adults who remember their lessons with you, and who will be inspired in their adult Jewish lives. So, teach your best lessons for their sake, as an investment in our Jewish future."

Some people are remembered for their great feats of wisdom and strength, and we assumed they were always wise and strong. Some people are born on third base and think they hit a triple. Some people are remembered for the long way they came up to be admired and respected. Our unique gifts are not means of instant gratification, nor are they meant to be compared to others' gifts. In a classic Jewish story, Rabbi Zusya, shortly before his death, understood that in the world-to-come, he will not be asked, "Why were you not like the great Moses?" Instead, he would be asked, "Why were you not the best Zusya you could be?" Our goal isn't to be Moses; as we learned from Rabbi Zusya; the goal is to be at our best, with all the gifts we have and are still learning about. We learn that:

**Every person has access to God, but for each person the Way is different. It is precisely in the diversity of human beings and in the diversity of their natures and their individual inclinations that we find the great potential for the human species.**

I understand this to mean that God creates a variety of creations. Who are we to judge what God has created? Ours is to see in another person's creation the spark of God's creative work. Ours is to hope that another person will see God's spark of creative work in us, too. And though it might be confounding to see others who are so different than we are, it should invite us, not to stare or protest, but to stand in awe and wonder at God's creative acts. Given room

and freedom, each person, created with a divine spark, will become who he or she or they are supposed to be. An adolescent who struggles, today, needs permission to grow into a healthy adult, tomorrow, spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

This ability to see in ourselves what we're intended to be and what others are, likewise, intended to be, requires faith in the Source of our creation. Connected to that Source, we can believe that our life is worth the life of the whole world. We need to believe that our way is also a way of humanity. Buber taught, "God does not say, 'This is the way to Me, but that other is not.' Rather God says, 'Whatever you do can be a Way to Me, provided that Way leads you to Me.'"

It doesn't mean that anything goes. It means that if we live by the obligations of our humanity, then we would naturally find holiness, Godliness. The questions we ask ourselves, "Am I where I need to be in my life? Have I been faithful to my role as a person in the world of humanity?" locate us on that path, and at this time of year, we pause to focus our sights on where we are going.

Now our questions become, "Am I headed in the direction I am intended to go? Are my goals aligned with my obligations to myself and to humanity?" Even in a world of 21<sup>st</sup> century technology, the internet and social media, we would reach similar conclusions that have endured for generations. That there is an individual Way to God means that nobody can tell you about their path and deny you yours. That is, no one can say that your outlook, your diversity, your gender fluidity, or your pronouns separate you from humanity. On the contrary, your diversity, gender fluidity, or pronouns enable us to be better acquainted because they help us see the divine in you and the divine in me. If every life is worth the life of the whole world, as we know it is, then the Way of humanity is everyone's to know.

The way we choose is outlined by Jewish possibilities reflected in culture, heritage, faith, language, food, ethics and rituals, and the land of Israel. Pick one or more, or all of them. We are Jewish whether or not faith comes first. We are Jewish because our faith demands that we wrestle with who we are and our contributions to humanity. Bound to that process, we learn Torah, we do Torah, and we grow daily into the persons we were uniquely created to become. Each of us can even become holy and live a holy life; not perfect, but set apart for a special reason and daily filled with meaning and purpose.

We learn about humanity's greatest potential in the story of Abraham, who was visited by three angels, while he was recuperating in the opening of his tent in the heat of the day. Even though holy and perfect angels approached Abraham, it was Abraham who became a holy person through the performance of a mitzvah, a holy deed; he provided the angels food, shelter, and hospitality. We're taught, "Nature needs the existence of humans to accomplish what divine beings cannot do, namely, that [humans], like Abraham, may become [humanly holy]."

We will not be Abraham in our effort to become humanly holy; we will find our own way to such human holiness. We begin again this New Year when we begin to see our children,

who are coming of age, as created with a Divine spark. As the Jewish poet, Nissim Ezekiel, watched his own children grow, he wrote:

Protect my children from my secret wish  
to make them over in my image and illusions.  
Let them move to the music that they love,  
dissonant perhaps to me.

And we, who have grown beyond adolescents and young adulthood, can still find our Way to humanity by nurturing the divine spark created uniquely within us. As we are all prisoners of the years, let's take a cue from a great line in a great movie, "Either we get busy living, or we get busy dying." Let us use the time we have been given to get busy living by using God's unique gifts to us for good and for blessing. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rabbi B. Mehlman and Gabriel Padawer (Translators), *The Way of Humanity: According to Chasidic Teaching* (CCAR Press, 2023).