

1st day of Rosh HaShanah – 5758 – Oct. 2, 1997

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Please humor me as I tell you all a joke that you've all heard before.

So it's the end of Yom Kippur, during the Ne'ilah service. The congregation is standing; the cantor is davening furiously, swaying from side to side - singing: "O Lord - I am nothing, nothing at all. I am but dust and ashes, a despicable receptacle for the soul you have given me. I am nothing, nothing'."

And the rabbi is so moved by the prayer that he starts to join in. "O Lord - I am nothing, nothing at all! I am the lowest of the low - dust and ashes - I have no worth - I am nothing - nothing at all!"

And then the president of the congregation starts to join in: "O Lord - I am nothing, nothing at all - like a broken clay vessel, like dust and ashes - nothing, nothing'."

And the rabbi pokes the cantor and points and whispers - Look who thinks HE'S nothing!

One of the reasons why I like this story is that it reminds us that we have to be very careful in choosing our role models. We often think of rabbis and cantors as religious role models - and we often think of their acts of prayer as the paradigmatic acts of prayer and authentic religious spirit.

However, we all know that this isn't always the case.

I'd like to take some time this morning to help us expand our repertoire of religious role models.

One of the most famous prayers of the High Holiday season is the Unetaneh Tokef, which we will sing later in the service.

This is the prayer that refers to the metaphor of God keeping tabs on all of us in a huge ledger book in the sky - all of creation passes before God today in terror - all the animals, all the people, even all the angels. And we're all scared, because we know that there isn't a single deed we've done that God won't notice. God catches everything. And in this book, it is recorded on Rosh HaShanah and sealed on Yom Kippur: who shall live and who shall die, who shall be at peace and who shall be in turmoil - who shall be degraded and who shall be exalted.

But according to Jewish tradition, there are three things we can do to avert the severity of the decree.

Utshuvah uTefillah utzdakah ma'avirin et ro'a hag'zerah.

But Teshuvah - penitence - Tefillah - Prayer - and Tzedakah - charity and good deeds - can avert the severity of the decree.

Teshuvah, Tefillah, and tzedakah. These are the three most significant concepts of the High Holiday season.

So how do we go about doing these things? Who are our role models for learning what Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah are?

We often like to choose role models who are larger than life - but often the people who are the best heroes and role models for us are not people who claim to be religious leaders or paragons of virtue - they're not people who claim to be extraordinary in any way.

Over the past year, I have heard three stories that have greatly moved me, and I would like to share them with you. They are stories about individuals from whom we can learn a lot about Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah.

This year, my role model for Teshuvah is a man named Larry Trapp of Lincoln, Nebraska.

His story is told in this book, *Not by the Sword* by Kathryn Watterson - published late last year. It's a true story, but it's certainly a demonstration that truth is stranger than fiction - and all the more wonderful.

The story begins when the cantor of the Reform congregation in Lincoln started to receive some harassing phone calls from a man named Larry Trapp, who lived in his neighborhood. Larry Trapp was the leader of the Ku Klux Klan of Nebraska as well as a full-time activist for racist and neo-Nazi organizations. He was full of anger and hatred, which he spouted non-stop. Until somehow, the cantor's reaction to him caught him off guard - Somehow, something clicked in Larry Trapp's mind. The cantor helped him to realize that he wanted to change his life.

Eventually, Larry Trapp renounced his racism and tore up his membership cards in all the racist organizations he had founded and belonged to. He began to travel around the region and around the country speaking out against the hatred that he had espoused. He grew ever closer to the cantor and his family. Larry Trapp soon became critically ill and could no longer care for himself - and the cantor and his family took him in to their home and cared for him in the final months of his life. Larry Trapp converted to Judaism in June 1992 - and died of his illness four months later in September 1992.

Usually we prefer to choose role models who are saintly in every way. But there's one thing that saintly role models can't teach us how to do. They can't teach us how to repent. On Rosh HaShanah, Larry Trapp is numbered among our teachers. According to Moses Maimonides, the medieval Jewish rabbi and philosopher, "The merit of penitents is higher than that of the perfectly righteous, because the former have struggled harder to subdue their passions." " - If it was possible for Larry Trapp to find peace in the last years of his life, knowing that he had started to undo some of the hateful damage he had caused in the first part of his life - How much more is it our responsibility - and our ability - to examine the damage WE have caused to the people around us. How much more is it our responsibility to examine our relationships with others - people close to us, and people in other communities - and purge these relationships of hatred.

Tefillah. Prayer.

I'd like to share a story I heard recently about the Jewish community of Lvov, in the Ukraine. This story took place at some point within the last five years.

As is the case with many Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union, the Jewish community of Lvov had not held any religious services in its synagogue for over thirty years. Upon the fall of communism, the restrictions on religious services in the synagogue were lifted. So a rabbi was sent to the community to officiate at high holiday services. Two thousand people showed up.

At one point in the service, the rabbi decided to tell a famous Rosh HaShanah story - the story of a Jewish peasant entering the synagogue on Rosh HaShanah. He didn't know Hebrew and had never learned the prayers. He was startled and intimidated by all the people in the service who seemed to know what they were doing. He wanted to pray to God - but all the Hebrew he knew were the letters of

the Hebrew alphabet. So he recited the letters of the alphabet slowly - hoping that God would weave them into the right words. And that was the most significant and heartfelt prayer offered in the synagogue for the entire holiday.

And just as he came to the climax of the story - a woman yelled out - "But rabbi - we don't know the Hebrew alphabet."

So the rabbi said: "Okay! I'll teach it to you! Repeat after me."

He yelled out the letter "Aleph" and a chorus of voices joined in with a loud "aleph." "Bet!" And the voices repeated: "Bet!" "Gimmel" "Gimmel" With each letter, more and more voices joined in. By the time he got to "tav," 2000 roaring voices had turned the repetition of the Alef-Bet into one of the most moving prayers he had ever heard. His own spirit soared to such heights that he was convinced that the Alef-bet of these worshippers was as profound as any service he had ever attended.

Our traditional role models for Tefillah are people who know all the prayers by heart and can daven up a storm. But perhaps the best Tefillah role models for us are the people whose prayer is backed up with the most authentic feeling.

What made this community's recitation of the letters into a prayer? Their sincerity - their desire to connect with their community and their heritage - their desire to connect with God in whatever way possible - their willingness to take risks, to do something unconventional - their desire for their words to have an effect on the world. For these reasons, the Jews of Lvov serve as our model today for Tefillah.

Our teacher for Tzedakah today is a woman named Ranya Kelly of Arvada, Colorado - a suburb of Denver. Her story is told in a chapter of a book called "Munbaz II and Other Mitzvah Heroes," by the American Jewish poet and itinerant Tzedakah professional ' Danny Siegel.

Once Ranya Kelly was looking for a cardboard box of a particular size. Someone suggested she drive to the nearest shopping mall and look in the garbage dumpster - maybe one of the stores would have thrown out a box of the appropriate size.

Ranya looked through the dumpster. She didn't find a box of the right size. However, she did find 500 pairs of brand-new shoes. Apparently they were thrown away by a nearby shoe store - shoes that were worn and returned, or slightly damaged, or just overstock or out of style. So Ranya took them home and began to give them to friends and relatives - and eventually to homeless shelters and other places that distribute food and clothing to the needy. She returned to the dumpster every few weeks and found more shoes.

Until one day an employee of the shoe store saw her fishing the shoes out of the dumpster. He let his boss know what she was doing - and the next week, the shoe store sliced up the shoes before throwing them away, in a conscious effort to prevent them from being worn again.

Ranya discovered that many other shoe stores - and other clothing stores, for that matter - routinely dispose of goods for a variety of reasons. Ranya volunteered to pick up these goods directly from the stores and distribute them to needy people - but her offers were rebuffed. So she continued to hunt through dumpsters near shopping malls - and she found perfectly usable items like mattresses, clothing, and blankets, which she donated to shelters.

Eventually, her persistence paid off, and now there are many stores in the Denver area which, instead of throwing away their goods, will give them directly to Ranya to be distributed. Some national store chains have instituted such programs on a nationwide level as a result of her prompting.

People who have met Ranya Kelly claim that she is a lively but unassuming woman who is somewhat surprised about all the media attention her activities had gotten. She doesn't consider herself extraordinary - she was just doing what she was taught people should do for one another.

I know that when I hear stories like Ranya Kelly's story, I am inspired and energized, but I also become painfully aware of all the good deeds I could be doing but am not. Her story prompts me to evaluate my Tzedakah activities of the past year and pledge to do better in the coming year - because I know I can do better. Probably we can all do more than what we're currently doing.

Our traditional role models for Tzedakah tend to be the great philanthropists - people whose contributions are measured in dollars, not in hours or energy. But perhaps the best Tzedakah role models for us are the people who give of themselves - who see something in the world that isn't working quite right and come up with a creative solution for it - these are the people who can truly teach us about Tzedakah.

Teshuvah, Tefillah, Tzedakah. The three most important concepts of the High Holiday season.

Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, tells us: "Eizehu chacham, ha-lomed mikol adam." Who is wise? The one who learns something from everyone. The truly wise person searches for unconventional sources of wisdom.

Over this high holiday season, and during the year to come, may we derive inspiration from a variety of different role models - may we see examples of Teshuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah in a variety of contexts - and may we be brave enough to learn from them and follow their example.