

Nothing Is Perfect

A few months ago I noticed that I was responding to people around me who had successfully completed various tasks by saying, “perfect.” I never used to say that. Then I stopped to think and realized that many people were saying the same thing – “perfect” – to me and to each other. “Wow,” I said to myself, “the *Mashiach* must have arrived, because the world has started to become perfect!” The truth is, more imperfections in the world seem to be popping up every day. Still, in the last year or two, this way of expressing satisfaction with something has really come into vogue. Maybe when something seems to have been done reasonably well we feel that it is, indeed, “perfect” – relative to the rest of the mess, that is.

Here are some examples of things that have been found to be not as “perfect” as we once thought they were. Researchers discovered that a drug used for diabetes may cause heart disease, and red wine that is good for the heart was found to be a cause of colon cancer. Hybrid cars can, indeed, help us reduce CO₂ emissions and stop global warming, but now scientists are telling us that cattle release huge amounts of methane gas into the atmosphere, and methane traps over 20 times more heat than CO₂. I guess some day soon the notion of a hybrid cow will take on new meaning. It seems that after a step forward, we take a step back, and frequently the solution itself creates a problem. Nothing is perfect.

So, now we are into our Yom Kippur experience. If there ever was a time when we are reminded that *we* are not perfect, this is it. This message reverberates throughout our *Mahzor*. It tells us that we are dust. It asks, over and over again, “What are we; what is our life; what is our goodness; what is our righteousness?” And then to cap it all off it assures us that “a human is no better than an animal, for everything is vanity.” And then, to prove its point, it offers us a list of 44 ways we have sinned. Instant inferiority complex! You ask yourself: Did I do all that? Well, probably not; and the truth is that the *Mahzor* is intended to brow beat us because often we are in denial about our shortcomings, and its function is to shake us up so that we will make the effort to make things better. And that is the point: Underlying all of the dark stuff is the bright hope that we can do better. That is what repentance, prayer and righteousness can accomplish. Our imperfections are not excuses for us to shirk our responsibility to correct the things in our lives that we can correct and to find ways to work on the other bad things that plague us. Life can get better, and it can have meaning. This is also an important Yom Kippur message.

Do you know what happened in Minneapolis on Yom Kippur, October 6, 1965? Sandy Koufax did not pitch in the first game of the World Series against Minnesota, because it was Yom Kippur. OK sports fans, here’s the next question: Do you know what happened in Los Angeles on September 9, 1965? Sandy Koufax pitched a perfect game against the Chicago Cubs, and the Dodgers won 1 – 0. That means that over nine innings Koufax gave up no hits and no runs, and neither walked nor hit any batters – allowing no runners to get on base. He faced the minimum of 27 batters and struck out 14. In fact it was the best combined pitching effort in baseball history. Bob Hendley, the Cubs’ pitcher, allowed only one hit, walked one man and allowed no earned runs. The

Dodgers' only run came on a throwing error. The two Dodger runners represent the lowest number of runners for both teams combined in baseball history. It was truly a "perfect" game.

OK sports fans, here's your third question: What happened in Los Angeles on May 11, 1963? That night I was in Dodger Stadium with my dear friend, now Rabbi, Moshe Rothblum. It was the Dodgers against their archrival, the San Francisco Giants. It was Sandy Koufax against Juan Marichal, and Tommy Davis, Willie Davis and Maury Wills against Willie Mays, Orlando Cepeda and Willie McCovey. 50,000 fans packed the stadium on a Saturday night. This was baseball at its finest. The Dodgers clobbered San Francisco, 8 – 0, but that was not the story of that game. Koufax pitched a no-hitter! He had a perfect game going for 7 1/3 innings, and then he walked a batter. He ended up walking two men, and that was it. Willie Davis used his great speed to catch up with a long line drive to preserve the no-hitter. When the final out was recorded, the place went crazy. Seat cushions went flying, and the ovation lasted for an eternity. What an amazing experience.

So here is my question: Granted, the perfect game was, technically, perfect. It was a great achievement for Koufax. But that was against the lowly Cubs. To be sure, that night Hendley, a pitcher with a lifetime 37 – 42 record and a lifetime E.R.A. of 4.00, was almost as dominant as the great Koufax, and that gave Sandy plenty of motivation to bear down and get into his game. The no-hitter I watched was against a great team that was the Dodgers' nemesis in the '60s, and against Marichal, one of the most feared pitchers in the National League, not only because of his pitching ability, but also because of his fiery temperament. But, the Dodger bats were hot that night, so Koufax was in the unusual situation of not having to carry the team on his pitching arm, as he did so often. He could have let up a bit, but he stayed focused. So which was the more significant victory, the perfect game or the no-hitter? Could the no-hitter be considered a bigger win than the perfect game? If so, is the perfect game really that perfect? You can argue about this during your break-the-fast after *Ne'ilah*. But, both games were amazing achievements and moments of greatness, and that is something we have to appreciate.

Nothing is perfect. The ancient philosophers saw perfection in the movements of the stars. While the heavens continue to leave us awe-struck, we now know that the heavens are far from harmonious and are as chaotic as things here on Earth. Stars are born and die. Black holes suck up and destroy everything in their reach. Asteroids collide with planets and wreak havoc upon them. Cosmic energy in deep space swirls like a hurricane, similarly sweeping up everything in its path. But, guess what? The heavens are still awesome.

Last week we celebrated the anniversary of the creation of the world – Rosh Hashanah. Our Torah does not teach us that the world God made is perfect. If anything, the opposite is the case. In fact, in Genesis, chapter 2 and following, in the Torah's second account of the creation and its aftermath, the Torah suggests that God created through a process of trial and error, and even then things did not work the way God intended.

In this account, God begins to create by making a single human, a man, and by putting him in a beautiful garden, which he is to work and guard. God then realizes that the man is alone and says, "This is not good." God then sets about correcting the situation. He attempts to provide the man with a "helpmate." All the animals are then created, and God waits for the man to pick out a partner from among the new creatures.

This also fails. After two “woopses” God takes a piece of the man’s body and fashions it into a woman, and when the man wakes up from the anesthesia and sets eyes upon his new partner he shouts, *zot ha-pa’am*, “this time [it worked].” Perfect! Well, maybe not. I remind you what happens next.

All is harmonious as the man, the woman and the animals live in peace in the idyllic garden. One of the animals, however – the wily snake – decides to shake things up a little by inducing the woman to taste the fruit of the forbidden tree of knowledge and to get the man to do the same. This is a violation of God’s rules, and as a punishment the people are expelled from the garden. Now life for the humans becomes a harsher experience, and, in fact goes downhill, until things get so bad that God has to bring a flood to wash away all the bad stuff and rebuild life on a cleansed Earth with a small group of people and animals that God saves in a boat. The rest of the Bible is a series of accounts of how challenging life can be, of instructions God gives to manage those challenges and how people do not always follow God’s instructions or live up to God’s expectations.

This is hardly a picture of a perfect world. The Bible, in fact, is an attempt by God to help our ancestors and us find meaning, direction and hope in a world that has great beauty and potential for wonderful things, but that is also filled with chaos and pitfalls, a world populated by people who can act as if they were created in God’s image or who can be like the snake and disregard God’s rules.

As we have seen, there are times when the Torah suggests that even God may not be perfect. This is a very upsetting notion. The Zohar, the great repository of Kabbalah – Jewish mystical wisdom – seeks to clarify this problematic conclusion by explaining that God has two sides, as it were: one that is distant and unknown and one that is close at hand and more comprehensible. The distant side of God is *Ein Sof*, literally “no end,” the eternal aspect of God. This is also called *ayin*, “Nothing,” or, as many modern commentators have called it, “No Thing.” This aspect of God is eternal, perfect, immutable, ineffable, incomprehensible and unattainable. It is literally “No Thing”, unlike anything in the universe. But “No Thing” is hardly a deity with whom we can have any kind of relationship. So the Kabbalists conceived of a “lower” realm of divine essences that “No Thing” emanated, that are close at hand, attainable, comprehensible – to a degree – but not quite perfect.

For the Kabbalists the activity of God described in the Bible is the work of this closer side of God. This side of God is variously our Parent, Lover, Caregiver and Judge. It can be compassionate, judgmental, loving, angry, healing or punitive, depending on how we act. And this aspect of God relies on us to keep our world in order and to help God keep Godself in order, as well. When we fulfill the will of God by doing *mitzvot*, we send healing spiritual energy heavenward to help repair the cracks in Godself that we created by doing bad things. This view of the world recognizes that the cosmos is broken and in need of repair, and is very empowering of human beings who, as God’s partners, help God move the world toward the perfection that presently is non-existent – except in “No Thing.” I find this notion of the role humans can play in *tikkun ha-olam*, repairing both the physical and the spiritual aspects of the world, to be most compelling.

Our world is not perfect. It is literally and figuratively cracked. The surface of the Earth is comprised of tectonic plates that move around rubbing and crashing against each other, constantly changing the shape of things. This movement causes our

earthquakes, but it also creates things of great beauty. When the tectonic plate of which India is a part crashed into the plate that comprises the rest of Asia, massive amounts of rock were thrust heavenward and the beautiful and awe-inspiring Himalayan Mountains were created. The Bible, in Psalm 121, teaches us that such magnificent and lofty mountain tops focus our attention upward and help us contemplate God who made the mountains, who is the creator of the tectonic plates and the earthquakes, and who is the source of our strength and who can help us get through the jolts and the shaking in lives.

But *we* have to learn how to make our way in the world, and to help us Torah teaches us that there is a tremendous amount of beauty and wonderfulness in God's creation, as imperfect as it may be. That is why Judaism has a *brakhah* for practically everything. That is why God wants us to fill our lives with doing *mitzvot*. All of this is intended to open our eyes to the beauty in the universe. By constantly engaging in the doing of the little sacred acts that really matter the most, we can get beyond the imperfections, find the meaning in life and participate with God in the *tikkun*.

There are times, however, when the imperfection of the world really gives us a powerful punch in the belly that can break our hearts and shatter our lives. Our community experienced such a moment this past summer. Ariela Batia Goldberg, a 19-month old girl, died as a result of an accident in a home that had all the safety features that responsible parents install to make it "childproof." Chaos can strike in spite of our best efforts to keep it at bay. This was the second time in my tenure as your rabbi that something like this happened. It was the second time I had to watch a small child, who was the day before perfectly healthy, slip away in its parents' arms in the E.R. It was the second time I had to try to help a young couple manage a *mélange* of emotions – fear, pain, grief, anger, love, compassion, clarity, confusion, faith, doubt, gratitude, desperation – in their attempt to comprehend and take hold of a situation for which no one can ever be prepared. It was reality turned on its head. A child is not supposed to be born and to come into people's lives, to be dangled for a few moments in front of a caring family filled with hopes and dreams, and then be taken away. An innocent child is not supposed to suffer like that, nor are her loving parents, who are truly wonderful human beings. You can't experience this kind of loss and then say, "perfect," you just can't.

But as was the case the first time this happened, the parents of the child became towers of strength as they groped their way through the darkness and found light, and as they actually helped to bring comfort to those who came to comfort them. Tragedy can bring out amazing responses and tap unbelievable reservoirs of faith, energy and resolve. Ivonne and Danny Goldberg, Ariela's parents, who gave me permission to talk about this with you, are still in pain and still trying to comprehend their loss, but they are also actively rebuilding their lives and finding meaning in the beauty of their two older children, the love of their family and friends and the presence in their lives of a caring community

And, as was the case the first time, a caring community – in fact, two communities of which the Goldbergs are a part, Temple Beth Am and B'nai David-Judea Congregation – came together to console and to grieve, to be weak and to be strong, to teach and to learn, to pray to God and to yell at God, to laugh and to cry, to remember and to promise not to forget. We surrounded the Goldbergs with a cocoon of love and comfort. People were present whenever they were needed.

One of the most amazing moments was when the other Beth Am couple who had suffered an almost identical tragedy more than a decade ago, Susan and Joel Stern, came to the Goldberg home during *Shivah*. They sat and talked for three hours. What a great mitzvah that was. One of the messages the Sterns brought with them was the lesson they learned in the course of their moment of darkness: Appreciate the blessings you still have in your life, make them multiply and then the light will start to shine again. That is exactly how the Goldbergs are approaching their future, even as their grief remains strong in this early stage of their recovery. And that is how we all should confront our own imperfect worlds.

So, maybe we should be more selective when we say “perfect.” Maybe “cool” or “great” or “terrific” or “amazing” or “excellent” or “outstanding” or “good job” would be better. Nothing in all of God’s creation is perfect, so let’s not assume we can find perfection. Rather, let’s learn to do a better job of appreciating the imperfect blessings that surround us: our sacred but imperfect selves, our wonderful but imperfect spouses, our amazing but imperfect kids, our beloved but imperfect parents, our dear but imperfect friends, our helpful but imperfect co-workers, our hopefully satisfying but imperfect jobs, the beautiful but imperfect flowers that bloom, and so on. We **should** strive to be better or to be the best we can – yes, because this effort can give us and God great satisfaction, and we will do a better job in *tikkun ha-olam*.

The Rabbis teach us in *Pirkei Avot* that we are not expected to finish the work, but we also are not free to abstain from doing it. We cannot achieve perfection, but we can make the world and ourselves better. And then God and the people who love us will say: “Good Job!” – and that is all we need to hear.

G'mar hatimah tovah.