

The Medium Kids and the Middle Path
Yom Kippur Morning Sermon, 5782
Cantor Jill Abramson

“MOM!!!!” yelled William, age 6, from upstairs. “I am bringing down my outgrown clothes for the medium kids!” The “medium kids,” his mother Susan replied with a questioning tone. Yes, the *medium* kids. “Who are the *medium* kids” his mother asked. You know, the MEDIUM kids, the kids whose families can’t afford new clothes. His mother paused and thought for a second, racking her brain for some semblance of a connection to families in need and the words “medium kids.” Oh, you mean the “*needy*” kids, she said back to her son. Yes, William said, the “medium” kids.

Six-year-old William, whose parents were members at my first congregation in Chicago, could not have known that his cute mistake would spawn a Yom Kippur sermon twenty years later.

What about those medium kids? What do they have to do with Yom Kippur?

Our sages teach that on Yom Kippur, those who are completely evil (*rasha gmura*) need not repent.

Likewise, those who are completely righteous (*tzadikkim*) also do not need to repent, but those who are “*benoni*,” meaning, in the middle, are asked to do *tshuvah*--or seek forgiveness.

Why don't evil people need to repent? The medieval philosopher Maimonides (commenting on the Talmud) explains that the fates of the wicked and the righteous are already inscribed and sealed on Rosh Hashanah, while the fate of the *benonim* (*those in the middle*) hangs in the balance until Yom Kippur. If those in the middle do *teshuvah*, they are inscribed for life; if not,

they are inscribed for death. (Rosh Hashanah 16b, as explained by Rambam)

The fact of the matter is that we are all *benoni*, somewhere on the spectrum in between *rashaim*, complete sinners and, *tzadikim*, pure and righteous. (Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein) Said another way, we are all some version of “medium.” We have righteous moments and we have moments where we fall short. We have moments where we act in accordance with our highest values and we have moments where we fall completely off the path.

And we are living in tough times.

In a world in which academic and financial success, as measured by GPA and income *alone*, is often conflated with personal achievement, it's nice to be

reminded that being “*benoni*,” being ‘medium kids’ is just where we want to be.

In a world where conversations are fueled by a lack of civility, it would be good for us all to strive to be a little bit more “*benoni*” in our public, national and international discourse. It reminds me how far we’ve strayed from “medium” ways, how we no longer see discourse characterized by measured tones. Our national conversations (as we all know) have been sharply divided among party lines and characterized by extreme positions.

In a conversation with Shir Ami member David Green, I asked him what he thought I should talk about in my sermons. His response: how about “...the extreme, reflexive partisanship that suffuses everything – government, of course, which overflows into pandemic perspective (masks/vaccines as mandatory public health policy vs. affronts to personal

freedom) and most every cultural and social issue you can think of. The hopeful ending is that perhaps the pandemic-weary have let down their defenses just a little, as evidenced by the apparent success of the upcoming compromise infrastructure bill; also, [how in Israel], the strange bedfellows with divergent ideologies (the Arab-Israeli party and the Jewish nationalists) ...resulted in Netanyahu's ouster [and a unity government]. The point is that compromise is still possible, and often the only way to get anything done. “

Want a job here, David?

This problem of extremes is evident all around the world. We can hardly pick up a newspaper without reading of a fundamentalist regime taking control and threatening freedoms, especially those of women and girls.

And right here at home. Sadly, I know of rabbis and cantors on these very High Holy Days who are afraid to speak their minds for fear of reprisal from those who disagree.

Last year, at the end of one of our adult education classes, our member, Lila Croen, thoughtfully said, “we’ve lost the ability to speak in moderation.”

How do we re-learn the skill of speaking in moderation? Maimonides was contemplating just this question when he spoke of something called the “Middle Path.” The Middle Path is characterized by speaking in measured tones and non-rigid thinking.

Maimonides teaches us in his book “Mishneh Torah” (De’ot, the laws of personal development, chapter 1, law 4):

“Each and every person possesses many character traits. Each trait is very different and distant from the others.” “One type of person is wrathful; they are

constantly angry. [In contrast,] there is the calm individual who is never moved to anger.”

“There is the one who is arrogant and the one who is always humble. There is the man who is ruled by his appetites—and [conversely,] those who do not desire even the little that the body needs.”

He goes on to write, “The two extremes of each quality are not the proper and worthy path to follow or be trained in. And, if a person finds their nature inclining towards *one* of them, or if they have already accustomed themselves in one of them, they must bring themselves back to the MIDDLE path.”

This does not mean that anger is bad and calm is good. There is a time for ANGER. Greek philosopher Aristotle justifies anger but also clarifies; good anger is the kind that motivates us to productive action.

However, when our anger suffuses everything instead of being constructively directed at the problem, we must engage in *tshuvah*.

Certainly there are entire communities who deserve to express anger...communities that are treated unjustly and unfairly deserve to express anger. People with different skin-tones who are hated and feared because of their skin-tone, deserve to express anger. Women who are treated as second-class citizens deserve to express anger.

Individuals are entitled to express anger as well. But sometimes, we lose our tempers when we shouldn't. We lash out knowing that we know better. *Tshuvah* is the process by which we can seek repair, and strengthen relationships that have become tarnished.

Maimonides also reminds us that we are all capable of every emotion on the scale. We get angry. We are

kind. We are bold. We are submissive. We are greedy. We are generous. We are happy. We are depressed. He goes on to teach us this: “The upright path is the *middle path* of all the qualities known to humankind. This is the path that is equally distant from the two extremes, not being too close to either side.

Medium kids. Middle paths. When it comes to talking to one another, and caring for friends and family, we need more of the “medium kids” in our lexicon. That doesn’t mean we shed our quirks or even all of our edges, but we need to learn that ‘medium’ is not a bad word. In fact, Maimonides teaches us, it is a goal.

When I work with a couple to prepare for a wedding, one of the questions I ask them is about communication. They talk about the problems they face and how they solve them. Invariably, one

identifies more as the ‘talker’ and the other is the ‘listener.’ Which one are you? Do you do most of the talking? Maybe a little more listening would do you good. Or are you the one who doesn’t venture forward with words? More comfortable being the listener? Maybe a little more talking would do you good. The middle path.

I am thinking about William today. William is no longer six years old. Did he grow up to be medium? Does he live his life on the Middle Path? I don’t know. Over time, he no doubt learned the important difference between “needy” and “medium,” and the deeper societal issues surrounding those in *need*. But the story of William is ultimately meant to teach us that living a life on the Middle Path is a practice to be learned; it does not come naturally to all of us. We must cultivate it, lean into it and embrace it. We are strengthened when we stay on the Middle Path. It is okay to be *medium*. Amen.

