

## Yom Kippur- Kol Nidre 2017 5778

During his recent lecture at the Chautauqua Institute, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks brought up one of my favorite topics regarding Charles Darwin and how he was plagued by the implications of what would be called his theory of evolution.

Darwin's dilemma: if survival is for the fittest, then this should select *for* those that work solely for their own survival benefit and *against* those who favor altruism- the act of selflessly helping one's fellow man. This notion really bothered Darwin, who, contrary to many of those who are misinformed about him and his theories, was a very religious man. Darwin was bothered because if his theory was correct, then humankind as a beneficent society, where we ultimately cared for each other, was doomed. What saved his theory, and Darwin's faith in man was the observation that generation after generation, altruism is actually selected for: societies have lauded and promoted *most* those who sacrifice and give to their fellow man: Mother Teresa, Bill Gates; those first-responders at the World Trade Center Ground Zero site who for months first tried to find survivors, then tirelessly dug to find the remains of those who perished- they did this, even though we know now that they were exposed to toxins and particulates, resulting in high rates of pulmonary disease and cancer. Yet, when interviewed, these brave people state firmly that if it happened tomorrow, they would go back again.

Darwin learned that an even higher attribute in natural selection was when societies of animals and people worked for the betterment of each other, even if there was no clear personal reward, even if this meant increased personal peril. Here are some of the examples of altruism in the animal kingdom:

- Vervet monkeys give alarm calls to warn fellow monkeys of the presence of predators, even though in doing so they attract attention to themselves, increasing their personal chance of being attacked.
- In social insect colonies (ants, wasps, bees and termites), sterile workers devote their whole lives to caring for the queen, constructing and protecting the nest, foraging for food, and tending the larvae. Such behavior is maximally altruistic: sterile workers obviously do not leave any offspring of

their own—so have personal fitness of zero—but their actions greatly assist the reproductive efforts of the queen.

- vampire bats regularly regurgitate blood and donate it to other members of their group who have failed to feed that night, ensuring they do not starve.
- in a famous lab experiment, rats worked to free trapped, distressed cage mates from restrainers, even if it meant giving up chocolate for themselves.

The term altruism was coined by the French philosopher Auguste Comte in French, as *altruisme*, for an antonym of egoism. He derived it from an Italian *altrui*, which in turn was derived from Latin *alteri*, meaning "other people" or "somebody else".

We all know of the personal stories of family members- parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, who sacrificed much and survived perilous journeys to come to America so that they could work their fingers to the bone for their children and future generations. We know the stories of Jewish merchants who sold their businesses at the beginning of the Second World War so that they could literally ransom trapped relatives out of Europe to freedom here in the US.

The altruism and sacrifice of all those who dropped their studies, their plans for a career, their plans for marriage and families, and then went to war to defend freedom during WWII- their actions, their altruism rightly earned them the title, the Greatest Generation.

Here's my question: in this age of increasing narcissism and self-aggrandizement, will altruism become extinct? Do selfless acts of kindness, helping your neighbor in need, do these things have a place in our ever-growing self-promoting, selfie-taking, fame-seeking society that is increasingly measured by how many hits your meme got rather than how many lives you saved?

We are told on the High Holidays that three things can reverse a bad decree by G-d: *tshuvah*, *tfilah* and *tzedakah*, repentance, prayer and charity. Altruism is the actually the highest form of charity because it is done without asking for anything in return, even a "thank you". Yet, our world seems to be becoming less thankful, less helpful to the "other". This is especially true when we are feeding more people than ever before, and except for war-torn areas, famine and drought are becoming less and less issues that mean

whole populations will starve. The dustbowls of the US South are long gone; our markets are uniformly full; Amherst suddenly has one of the highest concentrations of major supermarkets in the country.

With life so good, with little to worry about, with wars not affecting our daily lives, there is little impetus to be altruistic or to teach it. Complacency rules the day, just as long as it doesn't interfere with production of selfies.

But the world has a curious way of reminding us of how precarious life is. You know what quickly ruins our complacency? Hurricanes. You know what reminds us of our vulnerability? Forest fires. You know what underlines how precarious life is? Earthquakes. In a period of 2 weeks, masses of populations just in the Caribbean, Houston, Florida, and Mexico City were reminded how you can go from tweets and selfies to no electricity, no water and no hope.

And so, do you know what Yom Kippur really is? It is a mini-earthquake, and mini-hurricane, and min-forest fire. We subject ourselves to a mini-suffering, no food, no water, to remind us that what we take for granted every day is precious AND precarious; to remind us that we cannot survive as individuals, but rather, our safety is ONLY insured by helping each other in our concentric communities; to re-educate ourselves in the art and *mitzvah* of altruism, because if we forget these lessons, life as we know it might be just one tsunami from destruction.

But lest we think that this is the desperate, depressing message we are left with from the High Holidays, we are reminded of the covenant between G-d and Noah, in a *parsha* we just read two weeks ago, of G-d's promise to never again destroy humankind with a flood. This is the turtledove that G-d offers as a sign to Noah, and to us, that we will always have firm ground to land on. But this covenant comes with a condition, a requirement of us: we must perform altruism, tzedakah, everyday; our lives literally might depend on it.

Shana Tova U'metukah. I wish for all of you an easy and meaningful fast.