

Harnessing Habits of Holiness – Practice for the Religious Personality

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Over a year ago, one of my closest childhood friends experienced the loss of his father, Roger Schinazi. Roger was a larger than life figure, who in many ways held his family together in crucial and important ways. Though my close friend recited kaddish for his father, he was not sure he would make it to shul regularly and so I stepped in to support, as best I could, during his year of mourning and grief, and recited kaddish for Roger every day as well.

When I first heard that Roger left this world, in his early 80s, I cried like a young child. I am certain that in my close group of friends – a band of brothers who each immigrated to Montreal at around age ten – the reaction was similar.

To us, immigrant-band-of-brothers, Roger was more than just a close friend's father. In a deep sense, he was our grandfather. As you can imagine, most of us did not have local grandparents. Roger, who was about 20 to 30 years older than our own parents, naturally stepped into that role through his graceful charm and wise demeanor.

One of my fondest childhood memories of the Schinazi household was being woken up early Sunday morning after a sleepover at my friend's house by very loud Opera music being blasted from the living room. Sitting comfortable on his sofa chair, Roger Schinazi would listen intently to the music which played at decibels that would compete with any rock concert.

At first the music was completely foreign to me. It sounded ridiculous. Roger's son, Victor and I, or anyone else who might have slept there that evening would mock it, complain about it, and finally, with no success, try to sleep through it. And yet, after years of being woken up that way, in time, we got used to it. In fact we even started liking it, at least a little. And though we never truly admitted to it, ultimately opera found its place alongside punk music in our teenagers' heart of hearts.

As I recited Kaddish this past year for Roger I often thought of this story with great fondness.

The Talmud in Tractate Shabbat offers a teaching about the power of reciting Kaddish with a raised voice.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף קיט עמוד ב

אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: כל העונה אמן יהא שמיה רבא מברך בכל כחו - קורעין לו גזר דינו, שנאמר גבפרע פרעות בישראל בהתנדב עם ברכו ה'. מאי טעמא בפרע פרעות - משום דברכו ה'. רבי חייא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן: אפילו יש בו שמץ של עבודה זרה - מוחלין לו, כתיב הכא בפרע פרעות וכתיב התם דכי פרע הוא. אמר ריש לקיש: כל העונה אמן בכל כחו - פותחין לו שערי גן עדן, שנאמר הפתחו שערים ויבא גוי צדיק שמר אמנים. אל תיקרי שמר אמנים אלא שאומרים אמן. מאי אמן? - אמר רבי חנינא: אל מלך נאמן.

“R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: Whoever responds to the Kaddish by saying, “Amen; may His great Name be blessed forever and ever” with all his might – the evil decree made in judgment against him is torn up...

R. Chiya bar Abba said in the name of R. Yochanan: Even if there is a trace of idolatry in him, he is forgiven as a result of this response...

Reish Lakish said: Whoever responds to a blessing by answering “Amen” with all his might, the gates of the Garden of Eden are opened for him...

In commenting on this passage, Rashi explains that “with all of one’s might” means “with complete intention.”

רש"י מסכת שבת דף קיט עמוד ב

בכל כחו - בכל כוונתו.

Tosafot however offer a more plain explanations noting that, “when Jews enter synagogues and respond ‘*Yehey shemey rabba mevrach*’ in a loud voice, they cause the nullification of evil decrees.”

תוספות מסכת שבת דף קיט עמוד ב

כשישראל כננסים לבתי כנסיות ואומרים יהא שמיה רבא מברך בקול רם מבטלים גזירות קשות.

Rabeinu Yona offers a synthesis of both ideas:

כתב ה"ר יונה בפרק מי שמתו (ברכות יג: ד"ה בכל כחו) כלומר בכל כח כוונתו ומפני שיש בני אדם שאין הכוונה שלהם מתעוררת אלא על ידי הכח אמר בכל כחו, אבל אין צריך לתת קולות גדולות שיתלוצצו ממנו בני אדם.

"There are individuals whose focus and intent is only aroused through doing things loudly, with all their might. Nevertheless, one should not raise their voice in such a way that will cause people to mock them."

In his codification of the laws of the Shema, Rav Yosef Karo, the author of Shulchan Aruch adopts this very idea. The Shulchan Aruch notes,

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות קריאת שמע סימן סא:סעיף ד
נוהגין לקרות פסוק ראשון בקול רם, כדי לעורר הכוונה.

"We customarily recite the first verse of the Shema with an especially raised voice in order to arouse our focus and intent."

According to both Rabeinu Yona and Rav Yosef Karo at times we are called upon to adopt certain extreme and eccentric behaviors, behaviors that in fact do not truly reflect our internal state, in order to ultimately bring about a transformation within that very internal state. In other words, instead of allowing our disposition to determine our actions, we use our actions to reshape our disposition.

Not liking opera music? Fake it till you make it!

Not connecting during the Kaddish? Fake it till you make it!

Not focused during the Shema? Fake it till you make it!

In his book, "The Road to Character," the well-known NY Times columnist David Brooks discusses a similar behaviorist approach and notes with a measure of disapproval that this tactic has lost some of its appeal in our time.

He writes, “Today, when we say that somebody is repressed, we tend to mean it as a criticism. It means they are uptight, stiff, or unaware of their true emotional selves. That’s because we live in a self-expressive culture. We tend to trust the impulses inside the self and distrust the forces outside the self that seek to push down those impulses. But in [an] earlier moral ecology [going back to the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century], people tended to distrust the impulses inside the self. These impulses could be restrained, they argued, through habit.” (David Brooks, “The Road to Character,” p.57)

Brooks further notes that “In 1877, the psychologist William James wrote a short treatise called “Habit.” When you are trying to lead a decent life, [James] wrote, you want to make your nervous system your ally and not your enemy. You want to engrave certain habits so deep that they will become natural and instinctual. James wrote that when you set out to engrave a habit – say, going on a diet or always telling the truth – you want to launch yourself with as “strong and decided an initiative as possible.” Make the beginning of a new habit a major event in your life. Then, “never suffer an exception” until the habit is firmly rooted in your life. [...] Then take advantage of every occasion to practice your habit. Practice a gratuitous exercise of self-discipline every day.” (Brooks, *ibid*)

During World War II, Dwight David "Ike" Eisenhower, a five-star general in the United States Army, served as Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe. He was responsible for planning and supervising the invasion of North Africa in Operation Torch in 1942–43 and the successful invasion of France and Germany in 1944–45 from the Western Front. During those challenging days of great uncertainty, Eisenhower decided that it was crucial to constantly project confidence “in order to lead the army and win the war.” (Brooks 61) In his diary form the time, Eisenhower noted:

“I firmly determined that my mannerisms and speech in public would always reflect the cheerful certainty of victory – that any pessimism and discouragement I might ever feel would be reserved for my pillow. To translate this conviction into tangible results I adopted a policy of circulating through the whole force to the full limit imposed by physical considerations. I did my

best to meet everyone from general to private with a smile, a pat on the back and a definite interest in his problems.”

Brooks further notes that Eisenhower, “devised stratagems for dismissing his true passions. For example, in his diaries he made lists of people who offended him as a way of sealing off his anger toward them. When he felt a surge of hatred he refused to let it rule him. “Anger cannot win. It cannot even think clearly,” he noted in his diary. Other times he would write an offender’s name on a piece of paper and then drop it into the wastebasket, another symbolic purging of emotion. Eisenhower was not an authentic man. He was a passionate man who lived, [...], under a system of artificial restraints.” (Brooks 61)

In truth, the approach advocated by David Brooks, William James, and powerfully exemplified by Eisenhower, finds strong expression in the writings of Maimonides and his depiction of developing a moral personality.

In Mishneh Torah, the Rambam’s major code of Jewish Law, Maimonides discusses character development in Hilkhot Deot. Maimonides begins by explaining that, “Each and every person possesses many character traits” such as being wrathful, kind, prideful, or generous. (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Deot 1:1) Maimonides further notes that some traits are natural to us from birth and others are acquired through our experiences and encounters with others.

Finally, Maimonides explains that each trait has an extreme manifestation and that every person must therefore find the golden mean.

“For example: he should not be wrathful, easily angered; nor be like the dead, without feeling, rather he should [adopt] an intermediate course; i.e., he should display anger only when the matter is serious enough to warrant it, in order to prevent the matter from recurring.... [In addition] He should not be overly stingy nor spread his money about, but he should give charity according to his capacity and lend to the needy as is fitting. [...] The same applies with regard to his other traits.” (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Deot, 1:4)

And now Maimonides introduces his theory for Teshuvah, for change in one's personality and moral disposition: "How can one train himself to follow these temperaments to the extent that they become a permanent fixture of one's [personality]?"

Maimonides answers, "He should perform - repeat - and perform a third time - the acts which conform to the standards of the middle road temperaments. He should do this constantly, until these acts are easy for him and do not present any difficulty. Then, these temperaments will become a fixed part of his personality." (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Deot, 1:7)

Over the course of these High Holidays we focused on a number of critical *middot* (character traits), the cultivation of a moral personality that leads a holy and sanctified life. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah we spoke of the power of empathy and the theological underpinnings of this character trait. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we delved into the *middah* of gratitude as a foundational character trait in our worship of God. On Shabbat Shuvah we studied the *middah* of humility and the relationship between this trait and our ability to continue to grow morally and spiritually. Last night, we focused on creating a life of *kedusha*, of sanctity, underlying fundamental behaviors that create sanctity in our interactions with one another.

Empathy may not come easily to all of us. Expressing gratitude might be quite challenging to some of us. Humility doesn't come naturally to most. Leading a sanctified life may seem out of reach.

This morning therefore I am not asking any one of us to become empathic, or grateful, humble, or holy. These are lofty goals. For some of us, it may take a lifetime to reach them.

And yet! And yet, in the spirit of Maimonides, I ask each of us:

If you're not yet empathic, then at least act with empathy. "Repeat - and perform a third time - the acts which conform to the standards of" empathy. [...] "Do this constantly, until these acts are easy for [you] and do not present any difficulty. Then, [this temperament] will become a fixed part of [your] personality."

If you're not yet feeling grateful, then at least act with gratitude. "Repeat - and perform a third time - the acts which conform to the standards of" gratitude. [...] "Do this constantly, until these acts are easy for [you] and do not present any difficulty. Then, [this temperament] will become a fixed part of [your] personality."

If you're not yet humble, then at least act with humility. "Repeat - and perform a third time - the acts which conform to the standards of" humility. [...] "Do this constantly, until these acts are easy for [you] and do not present any difficulty. Then, [this temperament] will become a fixed part of [your] personality."

If your life does not feel sanctified, then at least act with holiness. "Repeat - and perform a third time - the acts which conform to the standards of" holiness. [...] "Do this constantly, until these acts are easy for [you] and do not present any difficulty. Then, [this temperament] will become a fixed part of [your] personality."

Late in the summer, the year of mourning for Roger Schinazi came to completion. I imagine that my friend and his family will always continue to mourn Roger, in some way or another, though the rawness of the loss will continue to dissipate with the help of time.

For me, this was the first time in my life that I had the responsibility to recite Kaddish for someone for an entire year without disruption. During those first days in which I no longer said Kaddish, as well as in the weeks and then months that passed after that, I suddenly discovered an unexpected gift.

In the first days, on several occasions, I accidentally continued to recite the Kaddish, until finally remembering that I had completed the task just days earlier. Still, in the weeks and months to come, to this day even, every time I hear the Kaddish, I think of Roger. In the act of reciting Kaddish for eleven months straight, I had imprinted my soul with his memory. Through the Kaddish, Roger had become a part of my life in ways that never occurred while he was still living.

“Repeat and perform...” “Repeat and perform...” “Repeat and perform” “Do this constantly, until” the memory of a loved one “will become a fixed part of [your] personality.”

As we now turn our attention to the Yizkor service, I pray that these repeated rituals of commemoration invite the traits, values and ideals, of those who are now longer with us into our souls and into our lives.

“Yehey Shemey Rabba Mevarach” – And may the name of the Holy One become blessed in all that we do, and ultimately, in all that we become.