

The Torah of Captain Kirk

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I've never crowd-sourced a High Holyday sermon. In fact, one of my quirks is that I like to keep my High Holyday sermons pretty close to my vest. But I made a slight exception this summer. Here is what happened.

An idea took root in my head that seemed like an ideal topic for a Kol Nidre sermon. I was thinking about it for a few weeks, thinking of stories that might help to make the main point of the sermon easier to understand. Usually, my go-to stories come from the Bible, the Talmud, Jewish history or from my own life. But suddenly I remembered an episode of Star Trek that was the perfect story for the point I wanted to make. I just had no idea how to find the episode on the web.

Now I know that in this situation an Orthodox rabbi would pray to God. I considered that for a moment and quickly dismissed the thought. Instead, I posted to the Adat Shalom listserv. Almost the same thing. So, in the middle of August, on a weekday night at 6:18pm I posted a request on our listserv for some Trekkies to identify themselves to me to help me with an inquiry. By 6:45pm, I had five volunteers, four of whom joined a Zoom call I set up for 8pm that same night! I described the episode and within minutes, I had the citation: Star Trek: Original Series, Season 3, episode 7 in the year 1969. The name of the episode was called, "The Day of the Dove". Thank you, Helen Avner, for finding this needle in a digital haystack. This sermon, "The Torah of Captain Kirk", is dedicated to you.

By the way, by noon the next day, I had another dozen Adat Shalom Trekkies emailing me with offers to help! If only it was so easy to get members to sign up for *oneg* duty!

Stardate: The 9th of Tishrei, 5783 (*that is tonight!*). Have you noticed how, with each passing year, it seems harder to cope with the things that life is sending our way? It goes from the mundane to the cataclysmic.

The mundane ledger includes online application forms that you can spend 2-3 hours on and then the entire form disappears and you have to start over (*show of hands*). Or, calling a company or a government agency, navigating through five levels of robot voices, finally getting a human on the line and then having the phone line go dead? (*show of hands*)

Now it is possible that I am getting crankier and more short-tempered as I age, but I swear, I don't remember these things happening in the 20th century.

The cataclysmic side of the ledger is a lot more serious and is definitely not affected by any alleged crankiness on my part. Climate change is real and we may have already passed the point of no return. Scientists project that we are likely to have 200 million climate refugees by the year 2050, people fleeing their homes because of drought, flood or natural disasters, all a consequence of global warming. Second example: The January 6th hearings have documented how we were but a hairbreadth away from a coup that would have ended our democracy as we know it. Third example: Despite millions of words written and spoken about the toxic polarization in our country that plays out from the halls of Congress to the local school board in Nebraska, no one seems to have a concrete plan of how we emerge from our dysfunctional political climate.

This summer Sandy and I spent a week at the Chautauqua Institute. (It was only a week later that Salman Rushdie was horrifically stabbed on the amphitheatre stage in front of hundreds of people.) For our week, the theme was "The Future of Democracy" and, as usual, the speakers were nationally prominent academics, journalists and policy experts. The formula after several days became familiar: 40 minutes of disastrous news followed by an anemic, 5 minute "optimistic ending" to close the talk. One speaker, Anthea Butler, an African-American professor of American Religion at the University of Pennsylvania was refreshingly honest. To an audience that was 99% white, she said: "I am exhausted; I am tired of fighting. My people have been fighting a system that was rigged against us for 400 years. Now the problem is at your doorstep. Your turn to figure it out; your turn to fight."

It might have been a bit too much truth for most of the audience to hear. And yet, I hear a lot of that fatigue among activists I know who have been in the trenches for a long time and who are having a hard time, "keeping the faith". In my own circle of acquaintances, it is not uncommon for the response to the umpteenth bad news story, to be: "The world is coming to an end." The reactions make me scared for our future!

Which brings me to the Torah of Captain Kirk and the episode, The Day of the Dove. The episode starts with a small force of Klingons, the arch enemies of humans, being captured by Captain Kirk and beamed up to the Starship Enterprise where they are being held as prisoners. But an alien life force made up of pure energy with the power to manipulate both mind and matter, takes control of the ship. All laser guns turn into primitive swords and most of the crew of the Enterprise gets locked behind doors that won't open so that there are the same number of humans and Klingons in a circumscribed area who are in perpetual battle with one another. In the story, when anyone gets mortally wounded, they recover in a matter of hours so that the battle will never end. Members of each side accuse

the other side of past atrocities that may have never taken place. Nonetheless, each side is convinced that the other side is evil embodied and must be destroyed.

Is this sounding at all familiar? I'm not talking about the Star Trek episode! I am talking about how art imitates life or, in this case, how art anticipated our current reality.

With the help of Spock, Captain Kirk realizes that the alien energy force on the ship gets larger and stronger as the hatred and fighting intensifies. He realizes that the alien is actually the catalyst for the conflict because it needs conflict to thrive. The humans and Klingons are but pawns in a cycle of recrimination, hatred and violence that will last for eternity unless the cycle can be broken. As the Enterprise is within minutes of exploding due to the deterioration of its lithium crystals, Kirk convinces the Klingon leader, Kang, that it is in their mutual interest to stop all fighting if they are going to survive at all. Kang is convinced and, in eerily prophetic fashion, states: "only a fool continues to fight in a burning house". With that, Kirk and Kang embrace, their respective crews, surprised, but inspired by their leaders, throw down their swords and the alien energy force gets smaller and smaller and smaller until it disappears from the Starship Enterprise.

I was not just being cute to name this sermon, "The Torah of Captain Kirk". I didn't do it just because the two heroes are Jewish actors named William Shatner and Leonard Nimoy. Rather, the episode I just summarized has some powerful Jewish messages.

The rabbis recognized a truth about human nature when they wrote about the good and bad inclination that is part of our psychological makeup. It was not an accident that they added a "hey" to *yetzer ha-ra*, as compared to *yetzer tov*. The rabbis knew that the evil inclination in us is stronger than our good inclination. The entire body of *mitzvot*, both ritual and ethical commandments, are understood as a training program to help us overcome our evil inclination.

Similarly, the entire body of Musar literature, developed in the late Medieval period in Europe, was designed to cultivate positive "soul-traits" so that we might overcome our evil inclinations. Musar developed disciplines that raised up certain character virtues/*midot* such as: *nedivut*/generosity, *anavah*/humility, and *emet*/truth-telling so that people could live more ethical, purposeful lives.

The rabbis' understanding of human nature anticipated by a couple of thousand years the discipline of positive psychology, that began in the late 20th century. Martin Seligman, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania has been the best-known advocate of positive psychology. He noted how the human mind is wired to be alert to that which might threaten our survival. He felt that much too much therapy focuses on dealing with negative experiences. This leads to a mindset of hopelessness. Practitioners of

positive psychology advocate that we make peace with our past, no matter how bad or traumatic it may have been, and focus on contentment with our present circumstances and optimism about our future.

This year I took an online course on Musar with Rabbi Shai Held of Hadar. We studied a book of Musar with which I was unfamiliar, *Midot v'Avodat ha-Shem*, (*Ethical Traits and Serving God*), written by Rabbi Chaim Friedlander in the late 19th century. The book contains this amazing passage: “The amount of *chesed*/lovingkindness one sees in the world, corresponds to the amount of *chesed* one embodies.”

It took a while for the importance of this teaching to sink into my head. Everyday we make choices about what we “see”. Seeing something, raises it up in our consciousness and, once on our minds, we are inclined to react to that which we see.

So, what are we “seeing” and “hearing”? News outlets make money when people watch or read their content. The more sensational media outlets can make the news, the higher the profits. In the new book, *Broken News: Why the Media Rage Machine Divides America and How to Fight Back*, author Chris Stirewalt explains how accurate reporting has taken a back seat to what industry insiders call “emotionally charged product”. The news media has taken a page from the playbook of social media companies which have made billions of dollars by stoking conflict, creating good guys and bad guys, offering conspiracy theories, and having every post suggest that the consequence of the story is a threat to your well-being or that of our planet. The net result is that we choose the news media that aligns with our own biases and we become convinced that the bad guys on the other side have to be defeated at all costs.

Captain Kirk realized that this downward spiral of demonization, hatred and violence between humans and Klingons would spell doom for both species. He had the wisdom to break the downward spiral by doing the unexpected and reaching out to his sworn enemy.

When our *yetzer ha-ra* is allowed free reign over our thoughts and actions, we reinforce the worst tendencies in our society. Rabbi Friedlander’s teaching tells us that we need to look for the good in people, the good in our society and yes, even the good in those we might see as our adversaries or enemies. In Hebrew this is called, *hakarat ha-tov*, recognizing the good in everyone and everything. Only when we do that, can we begin to embody those same good qualities, break the downward spiral and then, possibly, to enjoy the beauty of life again.

Here again I want to hold up how this Jewish teaching anticipates some hard social scientific research. Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard has been arguing for 20 years that despite what we read in the news and on social media, things are,

actually, getting better in the world. His books, *The Better Angels of our Nature* (2011) and *Enlightenment Now* (2018) are filled with charts showing worldwide improvements in mortality rates, ending poverty, decline in armed conflicts, protection of the rights of minorities and much more. Why isn't this making the news?

I always try to end my sermons with a “to-do” list so that if you have been moved by my message, you can not only talk about it with others but you might take some steps towards embodying it in the world, much in the spirit of Chaim Friedlander’s teaching about *chesed* in the world.

1. Cut back on your use and consumption of social media and televised news. Each feeds on extremism and conflict just like the alien force on the Starship Enterprise. It is addicting and it is toxic!! It will not improve your life. It may entertain and titillate but it is as bad for your brain as smoking is to your lungs. 279 birthday wishes on Facebook does not make up for the one post in which you learn that a close friend didn't invite you to his or her birthday party. The resulting jealousy and anger that you then feel is harmful to your relationships and poison to your soul.
2. Re-purpose the time you save by getting off social media and avoiding televised news and, instead, find a local service project where you can work with other people who are committed to helping those who are vulnerable and in need. We are the fortunate ones. Helping others is the kind of act of *tikkun*, repairing the torn fabric of our world, that is a healing balm for both the giver and the receiver.
3. Check out the website: Conspiracy of Goodness. It is filled with stories, both big and small, of acts of courage, ingenuity and generosity happening in the world. This is what we need to see and hear about a whole lot more about! This is what should be informing and inspiring us. Remember: The amount of *chesed*, lovingkindness you see in the world, corresponds to the amount of *chesed* you will embody.

I suspect that there may be a good many skeptics in this room who might feel that my message is a retreat from activism and engagement with serious issues that require our time, money and attention. It is nothing of the sort. It rather is a shofar blast that reminds us that we cannot create a better future for ourselves and for our children without a sense of gratitude for what we have and a doubling down on hope and optimism. That is the only way our ancestors were able to survive circumstances far more difficult and life-threatening than anything that we currently face.

We need to channel the Torah of Captain Kirk, realizing how we, ourselves, might be perpetuating a downward spiral in our relationships and in society at large. We must have the wisdom and courage to recognize that and change our behavior.

May 5783 be a year for positive thinking and a renewed commitment to seeing and manifesting goodness. Live long and prosper.