

Be a Mensch

Last week, I was lucky enough to hear an amazing man speak at Providence College. He is a true mensch. Anthony Ray Hinton¹ spent 30 years on Alabama's death row for a crime he didn't commit. Now, I can't even imagine spending one night in jail for something I didn't do. He is an extraordinary individual--his time in one of the most horrible and ugly places in our country did not leave him bitter and angry. Instead he writes and speaks from a place of compassion, open heartedness and even joy. While living in a 5 x 7 cell (not much larger than the space in which I stand right now), surrounded by filth and hatred, Hinton retained his humanity. He started a book club. He befriended and forgave a white supremacist, even introducing him (a man on death row for a brutal lynching) to the writings of James Baldwin. Hinton never lost his sense of humor. In fact, when he spoke last week he had the whole room in laughter. He gave this sage advice: "Humanity is something that I truly believe that we have to be taught," he said. It can be as easy as saying, 'have a great day, good morning, how are you?'

"All of us have humanity inside of us," he said. "but we decide when we want to give and who we want to give it to.... When you

¹ Anthony Ray Hinton spoke at Providence College [Humanities Forum](#). He tells his whole story in his book: [The Sun Does Shine](#).

give, look for nothing in return. . . I promise, it will come back to you. It will bless you more than you could ever imagine.”

Hinton’s wisdom is echoed in the words the great sage Hillel who taught, “*b’makom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiot ish.*”²

Which means: in a place where no one behaves like a human being, we must strive to be human.

The words are simple, the meaning complex.

When we are in a place where no one is acting human, we must strive to do better.

When we are in a place where morality is questionable: we must endeavor to be the voice of right.

When others are display cowardice, we must respond with courage.

When the majority act with callousness, we must be the one to care.

When others are complacent, we must disregard their indifference and take action.

Or, put bluntly, When people are behaving badly: be the one to be a mensch.

² [Pirke Avot 2:6](#)

To be a mensch is powerful shorthand for humanity at its best. It means to actively approach the world in the spirit of goodwill with an open and generous heart.

In many languages, when we say “well, he’s only human” it bespeaks frailty and weakness. But in Yiddish, when we say she’s a mensch, it is the best thing we can say. The word mensch, as I am reminded of often by our German speaking friends, simply means “human.” To be fully human is a quality for which we aspire. For to be true to our humanity means to be civil, thoughtful and treat others as we would like to be treated.

Literary critic Phyllis Rose spoke of her mother’s use of this term in her childhood: “my mother wanted each of her children to mature into a *mensch*, a human being, a caring, loving, responsible person. To be a mensch was the pinnacle of her moral code, and it didn’t matter that it meant “man.” Women could be mensches, too. “Be a mensch” meant: “Live up to your responsibilities. Write thank-you notes. Make the best of things. Strive, seek, find, and do not yield.”³

Rabbi Hillel would agree. He emphasizes in this passage from the Mishnah that *menschlekeit* (the art and science of being a mensch) is more important than fearing sin, than piety or than

³ <https://theamericanscholar.org/my-mothers-yiddish/#.W5hTzs5Kipr>

even teaching Torah. To be decent and kind--especially when there is an absence of both--is courageous and holy. On this day where we are stripped down to our very essence we are not asked to be more than what we are capable of being. To be a mensch means to tap into the best parts of ourselves, even when it is not easy. It is not just being nice--to be a mensch is to actively do the right thing.

The great Rabbi Hillel was known for his humanitarian ways. In a generation that struggled with transition and tyranny, Hillel stepped into the breach of leadership. There is a reason we have Hillel houses and a Hillel sandwich and why most of the time the law favors Hillel's ruling. For Hillel was a mensch. His words have an openhearted quality that is less concerned with the letter of the law than the spirit of the law.

Hillel knew what it was like to be an outsider. It was Hillel who couldn't afford entrance to the House of Study and he lay on the roof near a skylight so he could learn . . . in a snowstorm.⁴ It was no wonder when a potential convert approached him and asked him for accessible Torah learning, Hillel responded with an open heart. He taught him: Do not do unto others as you would not have done unto you-- all the rest is commentary, go and learn it.⁵

⁴ [Yoma 35b](#)

⁵ [Shabbat 31a](#)

So when Hillel says, “In a place where there is no humanity: be human,” it has the weight of one who knows civility, leadership and compassion. The phrase in Hebrew itself recognizes that to be a mensch is not always easy. Hishtadel is a word in Hebrew that means to strive. The root Sh-D-I means to lobby or persuade. Histadel is in many ways saying we must persuade ourselves to be our best selves. In modern Hebrew it means to try hard. . . for the high road is uphill.⁶

Some of you may remember the Hasidic story (told at Jewish camps many times over) that talks about the difference between heaven and hell. In both places, there are green lawns, elaborate banquet halls with tables filled with platters of food. In both places, too, peoples’ arms are rigid, unable to bend at elbows or wrists, and thus they cannot feed themselves. Those in hell languish in hunger while a bountiful feast sits before them. But in heaven, people sit across from one another and feed each other.

There is one thing that separates the best of places, Heaven, from Hell. That is the way we treat one another. If we are prepared to help out our neighbor. To reach out with compassion to the person across the table from us, we can have Heaven. And if we are filled with a stinginess of spirit we all go hungry.

⁶ Inspired by Rabbi Jonathan Aaron’s article in the [Jewish Journal](#)

And so preaches Isaiah in our Haftorah⁷.
Share your bread with the hungry,
Take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.

When we look around and see that there is a paucity of decency, we must be the moral voice. When we see that there is suffering, we must step forward into the breach. When we see inequality because of race, gender, sexual orientation or religion --we must stand up for what is right. Our fast today reduces us to our worst (Tired, hungry and exhausted)--so that we can be inspired to give our best.

Hillel's wisdom is not necessarily about grand sweeping gestures. It is often about the small ways in which we support one another. The ways we lift each other up and cheer each other on. To be a mensch is to help those who may not be able to return the favor. To do good without reward.

"In a place where there is no humanity: be human." Hillel's words could have another meaning. One should act as a mensch when there is no one else around, in a place where there literally are no other people. We can consider how our friends and neighbors

⁷ [Isaiah 58:5-8](#)

opinions keep us on our best behavior. Are we the same person in public and in private? How do we behave when no one is around? Do we summon the same goodness when it is not witnessed, posted on social media or advertised to others? We must be our very best because it is who WE know we need to be. Not because of the accolades or reward. But because our heart tells us it is right.⁸

And we often don't know how just how our kindness and compassion impacts others. We don't know where our influence ends. But in doing the right thing. In standing up for what is right, we just might inspire more mensches.

"Let me tell you my story," a cab driver said to Ron Suskind⁹, Pulitzer prize winning journalist, on the way to the airport one day.

"I am from Somalia. It is a tough country and I have lived a difficult life. I was lucky that I had a passport and a visa to get me out of the country as a soccer player. And just enough money to buy a plane ticket to New York.

I arrived in Kennedy airport in January. It was 6 degrees outside. I had no coat and spoke just a few words of English. I had just a

⁸ Interpretation inspired by Rabbi Shmuel Yankelowitz, Pirke Avot: A Social Justice Commentary pg. 78. Also inspired by Rabbi Wolpe's [treatment](#) of this text.

⁹ Adapted from story delivered in Suskind's 2015 [Commencement Speech](#) at Lewis and Clark College

piece of paper with the name of my contact on the soccer team who I must meet in Virginia.

I went to the clerk behind a desk with American Airlines written on it.

I showed him my piece of paper.

He made the universal sign for money. I reached into my pocket and pulled out 5 dollars. That was all I had. We looked at each other.

And then he reached into his pocket, pulled out a piece of plastic (his own credit card), swiped it in a machine and handed me a ticket.

Then, I knew that something extraordinary had happened.

I spoke no english. So I tried to thank him with my eyes.

I made it to Northern Virginia, found my connection on the soccer team, worked at a Pizza Hut and learned English. I met a woman from Somalia. We had children and made a life.

All because of the man in Kennedy Airport.

Then, an amazing thing happened to me a month ago. I was in the cab line at Washington airport. A small Vietnamese man with a big bag-- was at the front of the line. All he had was a piece of paper with an address--two hours away in Virginia. I made the universal sign for money.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out one lone dollar.

So I said, "Get in."

And we drove way into Virginia until we reached a tiny house where an even tinier Vietnamese woman ran out and hugged him tightly.

He turned to me, he spoke no English.

But I could see he was trying to thank me with his eyes.

I thought of the man in Kennedy Airport who helped me.

Now I am him.

And I looked at the Vietnamese man and I said, "now it is your turn."

Now it is our turn.

On this Yom Kippur morning our fast, our reflection, our repentance is a reminder:

B'mkom she ein anashim, hishtatel l'hiot ish.

In a place where there is no humanity: Be a mensch.

As Hillel also asked, *Im Lo Achshav, Ematai?*

"If not now, when?"¹⁰

Anthem: [If Not Now When](#), Carrie Newcomber

¹⁰ [Pirke Avot 1:14](#)

