

I trust that just about everyone here today has heard teachings or wisdom from what we call, “Pirke Avot,” usually translated as "Ethics of the Fathers."

I begin today by sharing a text from Pirke Avot which you most likely have heard before.

My goal is to examine this text more carefully, more deeply, and perhaps from a perspective you have not yet considered.

The author of the text is the great rabbinic sage, Hillel, who taught:

EEm Ayn Ahnee Lee, Mee Lee— If I am not for myself, who is for me?

U’cheshehahnee l’atzmee, Mah Ahnee – and when I am for myself, what am I?

You may have heard this second phrase more commonly translated as, "and when I am ONLY for myself, what am I?

But, when I carefully examine the phrase, I don't see or hear the term, "ONLY."

And finally the third phrase, “V’Eem lo achshav, Aymatai – And if not now, when?

Hillel begins where he must, where all of us must, with the self, – "if I am not for myself, who is for me?"

Ultimately, learning how to live for one's self is unavoidable, but despite being unavoidable, it is not very easy.

Because while we must negotiate our own lives, ultimately, by ourselves, even the most solitary life is never lived entirely alone.

And living with others, even minimally, is not so easy.

But it all begins with Ahnee – the I, the self, my sense, your sense of who you are, and what you need in life:

EEm Ayn Ahnee Lee, Mee Lee– If *I* am not for myself, who is for me?

One reason for this topic tonight is due to a wonderfully challenging book titled, "The Road to Character," which I read at the beginning of the summer.

It is the most recent book by David Brooks, the New York Times columnist and PBS political analyst.

David Brooks gets to the essential message of his book, in the opening paragraphs of the introduction where he

distinguishes between what he calls "resume virtues and eulogy virtues."

"The resume virtues are the ones you list on your resume, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success.

The eulogy virtues are deeper.

They're the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being - whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.

Most of us would say that the eulogy virtues are more important than the resume virtues, but I confess that for long stretches of my life I've spent more time thinking about the latter than the former."

David Brooks is Jewish and also has a wonderful appreciation of other religions, especially Christianity.

How religion helps to shape and challenge character is evident throughout the book.

The very first reference to a source which helped form his thoughts on these two sets of virtues – resume virtues and

eulogy virtues – is the book, "Lonely Man of Faith" written by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in 1965.

There are two different creation stories found in the Torah – Genesis chapter 1 as distinct from Genesis chapter 2.

It seems as if Adam, is created twice, once at the end of chapter 1 by God's Word, and once at the beginning of chapter 2 from the dust of the earth.

Rabbi Soloveitchik "argued that these represent the two opposing sides of our nature, which he called Adam I and Adam II."

I don't think it's too far a stretch to see the Adam I in each of us described in the first part of Hillel's teaching:

Brooks describes Adam I as the "career oriented, ambitious side of our nature. Adam I is the external, resume Adam.

Adam I wants to build, create, produce, and discover things. He wants to have high status and win victories."

Do you hear Adam I in the first part of Hillel's teaching - "if I am not for myself – who is for me?

Now listen to Brooks' description of Adam II and see if you can hear the second part of Hillel's teaching: "and when I am for myself, what am I?"

“Adam II is the internal Adam.

Adam II wants to embody certain moral qualities.

Adam II wants to have a serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of right and wrong – *not only to do good, but to be good.*

Adam II wants to love intimately, to sacrifice self in the service of others, to live in obedience to some transcendent truth, to have a cohesive inner soul that honors creation and one's own possibilities."

Adam I lives by “the logic of economics.

Input leads to output.

Effort leads to reward.

Practice makes perfect.

Pursue self-interest.

Maximize your utility.

Impress the world.

Adam II lives by an inverse logic, a moral logic, not an economic one.

You have to give to receive.

Success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride.

Failure leads to the greatest success, which is humility and learning.

In order to fulfill yourself, you have to forget yourself.

In order to find yourself, you have to lose yourself.”

Let me repeat one sentence from the David Brooks paragraph I just quoted:

"success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride."

There is any number of examples, well-known to us, which can demonstrate how this is true – "success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride."

Being successful, especially in a highly visible and public profession, is quite demanding, and it is often *more demanding to remain successful*.

That is why very often, athletes, celebrities, performers, often turn to foreign substances because they're looking

for any possible way in which they might be able to “up their game.”

Think of Lance Armstrong.

And if they are not using foreign substances, often these successful people who are striving to remain successful, will embellish ***their resumes*** in order to sound more virtuous.

Think of Brian Williams, who at least on the surface was very much admired and trusted as someone we would want to invite into our living room every night to inform us of important events occurring throughout the world.

And then, over time, Brian Williams felt that it wasn't enough any longer to be the **messenger** of the news.

Perhaps he felt there were other people who could perform that task just about as well as he could – but, **if he became the news**, if he became the hero in the news, that would be so much harder for someone else to match.

"Success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride."

Let me share with you something I learned about another well-known television personality – Jerry Springer.

In early August I co-officiated at a wedding ceremony with Jerry Springer's Rabbi, from Cincinnati.

This Rabbi told me that in person, Jerry Springer is very different than he appears on television.

He is thoughtful, considerate and very generous.

People in Cincinnati know this because prior to his current television show, he was a local news broadcaster in Cincinnati.

The Rabbi said that many people attest to Jerry Springer's ability to present the most thoughtful 90 second commentaries at the end of local news broadcasts.

He also, was extremely generous to his synagogue and has helped sustain the congregation through his generosity.

This Rabbi spoke in glowing terms about a man we may think we know from other contexts.

Life is not always only what you see on a resume, and sometimes, virtue is really hidden from the public eye.

Some of us are quite successful as Adam I's - we are very good at being Ahnee Lee - for myself, but we know from

experience and from an ultimate sense of dissatisfaction that it is not always enough.

David Brooks tells us that his book is about Adam II, so after this wonderful introduction from which I have been quoting, Brooks proceeds to provide essays on several people over the centuries who are examples of successful character development.

They are people who either always were or eventually became Adam II.

The people about whom he writes are far from perfect and some of the examples might surprise you.

I strongly suspect that all of them will impress you.

A few of the more well known examples: Frances Perkins, Dwight Eisenhower, George Elliot, Augustine, Samuel Johnson, Bayard Rustin and others. (George Marshall)

Hillel has taught, Rabbi Soloveitchik has demonstrated, and David Brooks has learned that awareness in life may begin with being for yourself, as Adam I, but it shouldn't stop or end there.

To nurture your Adam I career, it makes sense to cultivate your strengths.

To nurture your Adam II moral core, it is necessary to confront your weaknesses.

That's why we are here today, isn't it?

To both cultivate our strengths, and confront our weaknesses!

Isn't that what we all need to do, every year, if not every day?

Don't we all need to improve who we are?

Don't we all need to be better people?

And, all of us here today know that is what these days of repentance are all about.

And so, we come to shul, for several hours on these days, because maybe here we **will** find a road to character.

At the Rabbinic retreat Sharon and I attended this past summer, Rabbi Steve Sager told me how one day he and his wife Sabina went to Sears to buy a new refrigerator, in Durham, North Carolina.

The sales woman was eager to complete the sale so she was going out of her way to point out all the special features found on this refrigerator.

And finally, this woman said "see that thing over there, on the side of the door, *that's a humility control!*"

And Rabbi Sager responded – “WOW!”

Read David Brooks’ book, the "The Road to Character," and you will learn that he places a great emphasis on the importance of humility in building character.

At the end of his book David Brooks presents 15 propositions which form a *humility code* summarizing much of what he teaches on the previous pages.

I conclude today by reading proposition number nine, and as I read it, perhaps you will hear why it is so important for us to reference our ancestors, the patriarchs and matriarchs, so frequently in our prayers.

No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own.

Individual will, reason, compassion, and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed and self deception.

Everybody needs redemptive assistance from outside – from God, family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, and exemplars.

If you are to prosper in the confrontation with yourself, you have to put yourself in a state of affection.

You have to draw on something outside yourself to cope with the forces inside yourself.

You have to draw from a cultural tradition that educates the heart, that encourages certain values, but teaches us what to feel in certain circumstances.”

EEm Ayn Ahnee Lee, Mee – If I am not for myself, who is for me?

U’cheshehahnee l’atzmee, Mah Ahnee – and when I am for myself, what am I?

There is a third part of Hillel’s teaching – V’Eem lo achshav, Aymatai – And if not now, when?

And the answer to that question is – going to be discussed tomorrow morning.

Shana Tova to all!