

As Jews, we have a tendency of seeing the dark side;
anticipating the impending clouds even on a sunny day.

Four Jews are sitting in a Kiev café.

Officers of the Czar rush by led by their attack dogs.

Nobody says a word.

Finally, one man groans “Oy...”

“Oy Vey iz Mir” affirms the second.

“Nu...?” says the third.

At this, the fourth friend gets up from his chair
and pointing at the other three threatens:

“Listen, if you don’t stop talking about how terrible everything is, I’m leaving!”

The 20th century has been traumatic...

And now into the middle of the 2nd decade of our 21st,

Life’s anxiety—socio-politically, psycho-spiritually, is no less looming:

Terror remains a global concern, and with the Iran deal,

Israel’s security and the world’s terror threat may be put to the test as never before...

Syrian refugees streaming into Europe, desperately seeking a safe home...

And here at home, racist outbursts, violent rage killing the innocent...when will it stop?

Venomous hate, Anti-Semitic acts surfacing across Europe.

How do we deal with all the tsuris?...After all, what can we do?

Shaking our heads, perhaps “Oy-Vey” is our most valid response...?

Or maybe it’s a default, engrained in us over centuries of suffering,

And this century of successful American acculturation,

That brings an almost ambivalence in the face of life’s anguish,

Causing us to repress what should be our natural reaction as Jews.

For what we have sublimated is the “inner core of the Jewish people’s soul,”

The source of our sacred purpose—the real reason we have gathered here this holy day.

After all, this Day of Awe is the moment of the world’s *At-One-ment*, even though it’s falling apart.

Thus, our coming back to Creation’s renewal this time ever year

is meant as reminder, not of *God’s place* in this earthly experiment, but our own...

“And God said: Let us make a human in our Image, after our likeness...”

We carry that Image inside; not some of us, but all of us.

And so 5776 sends us forth from the Garden to forge our reality, to re-shape our destiny;
to become co-creators of a world not quite finished...

This YK day propels us to plow & replant; to try and make the world God’s Garden again;

By pulling out weeds of discord and intolerance, advancing human growth over hate,

trying to make God’s dream our reality.

Yet we look at life’s craziness and sigh: “OY...”

For we have lost something central along the way... I’d call it our **CHUTZPAH**:

That is, Imagining that our life-choices

Could actually lead the world to become more healthy/more holy/more whole;

Because of us, somehow, more filled with God’s Presence.

Make no mistake: it is THIS very audacious assumption

that’s been the operative supposition since our people’s start...[[The Chutzpah Imperative](#), Feinstein, pgs 3,5]

[A brief retrospective will prove the point]

Abraham, founding father, is the King of Chutzpah,
not alone called to Covenant, but to keep the Creator on track...
Calling God to question at the approaching destruction of the twin sin cities,
Abraham bargains down to ten,
As we remember, the number we need in Jewish tradition to make a Minyan.
But more telling, insists Rabbi Ed Feinstein,
Is that “ten is the minimum quorum required for nurturing moral responsibility.”
Which teaches us that this God of ours is more committed
to fostering the world’s justice through *our* hands
than maintaining authority through the Hand of the Divine.

What Covenantal CHUTZPAH!

Even the challenge of RH’s Torah in this regard rings loud & clear:
Abraham’s silence in the Akedah’s wake may score high on the ‘faithful servant’ scale,
But fails miserably on the moral courage standard.

...Just take a moment to consider the trajectory:

Again & again our people’s perseverance is actually the affirmation
of Israel’s ultimate life-purpose, the core of our Covenant: CHUTZPAH!

In Egypt, we learn that no chains can enslave the spirit,
That the servitude of some compromises the freedom of all...

We discover that our waiting by the side of the sea for the waters to part
will not bring deliverance; **that** is up to us...CHUTZPAH!

In the Wilderness we learn to trust in tomorrow—fed by manna from above,
And to trust in each other—sustained by *kedoshim tih’yu*,
the presumption that by coming together in community we could be holy... CHUTZPAH!

And, settled in the land only to be exiled,
We learn that the Promise is *not* in settling down,

But in rising up...that even cast out, we can come home again... CHUTZPAH!

Then, with diaspora exile,

Wandering but never lost, thanks to the Rabbis—taking Torah on the road,
We learn that wherever we bring Judaism to life,
so comes the possibility of God’s Presence... CHUTZPAH!

...Fast forward to the 16th century, for the Kabbalist’s mystical approach
might just be the most *Chutzpadik* of all,

Submitting a different script of the Creation story we celebrate these Holy days,
thanks to the ARI—Rabbi Isaac Luria...

Creation begins with God’s withdrawal—*tzimtzum*,
Making room for divine radiance to fill it...

But God’s emanation is a light too hot for the world to handle,
And the world cracks, sending fragments flying,
shards of the Holy One’s light scattered all about.

Our task, then, according to Lurianic Kabbalah/Medieval Mysticism,
Is to gather the bits of light buried within the world’s darkness,

And so perform *Tikun Olam*—putting this fragmented existence back together again.

CHUTZPAH!!!

Inconsequential in the cosmic scheme, we possess the power to redirect God's light and, in so doing, redeem this world...

Show of hands...Does this sound at all familiar?...[I hope so!]

Over time, Kabbalah's Creation myth was distilled of its mystical mystique and reconditioned by earlier 20th century Reform as the neo-Prophetic call to action embodied through social justice.

Yet...despite the RAC[Religious Action Ctr] here & in Israel's continuing to fight for a more pluralistic peoplehood & planet, the full impact of Luria's reframing never fully caught on.

For what was intended was a life of utmost intentionality

Where our every act, our mundane daily exchanges,

Our decisions and demeanor could impact the sacred balance of our world.

Undeniable CHUTZPAH: to approach each new day empowered by an Image within,

That you see reflected in every other person,

Compelling, inspiring you to reassert your responsibility

in fixing creation...

YET, with the world's harsh reality staring back at us,

We simply sigh: "OY...." When it comes to life, we mostly settle...

...It's easy to go about your business with life-blindness;

to deal only with today and never look towards a different tomorrow.

Globally overwhelmed...personally overwrought,

we toss in the towel on life...assuming

"our fate is determined by forces far beyond our control." [Chutzpah, 151]

Yet Rabbi Ed Feinstein's imperative cannot be ignored:

"CHUTZPAH—the ancient Jewish idea that sees each self as a vessel of divine blessing

Is the missing element that can save modernity from meaninglessness." [Chutzpah, pg 144]

The world is incomplete—under construction....

And today's *At-one-ment* affirms our place & purpose in the cosmic scheme...

Our little lives matter more than we might ever imagine....

SO the question this day of all days looms large:

HOW do we get back our nerve?...

For David Brooks, and I think for all of us,

the way to reclaiming our Chutzpah is closer than we realize.

In his recent book, he calls it The Road To Character,

but as we walk this annual "Road to Return," it means even more.

In an April 11th NY Times Op-Ed, Brooks reached out to his readers,

Asking them to send him their answers to the same questions operative in his book, questions so chutzpadik they are meant for this spiritual GPS moment:

"Do you think you have found the purpose of your life?"

If so, how did you find it? Was there an experience, a person,
A book or a sermon that decisively helped you get there?..."
Distinguishing between our customarily pursued resume virtues—fame, wealth,
status/social standing...and our eulogy virtues—personal integrity, strength of spirit,
who we are inside...Brooks challenges us to find role-models who have led inspired lives
by developing the latter...

And lest you think this journalist's call to character is just a literary exercise,
He admits outright: "I wrote this book, to be honest, to save my own soul...
You follow your desires wherever they take you so long as you are not obviously hurting
anyone...You figure if the people around you seem to like you, you must be good enough...
It's easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity." [The Road to Character, Brooks, Intro xiii-xiv]

We can be "good enough," live a "do-no-harm" existence or we can be more...
We can cultivate a commitment of heart that ignites our spirits and inspires others.
Saving our own souls—living that journey on the road to character,
Reclaiming our *Chutzpah*, we can at the same time save our world.

The select handful plus of outstanding leaders Brooks uses as primary role models,
whose lives attest to the supreme values they hold, could give us the wrong impression.

It's not the notoriety of the Eisenhower first family,
Or WWII Chief of Staff General George Marshall, or St Augustine,
or the founding mother of the Catholic workers' movement, Dorothy Day.
Rather it is that even with their fame,
They looked inside and found the flaws which, unchecked,
might otherwise have confounded their character...

Even with title and stature, they still asked themselves that question:
What is my life purpose? [HOW does my life matter?]

A question—and so a journey for us all, as Brooks makes clear:
"I came to the conclusion that wonderful people are made, not born;
That the people I admired had achieved unfakeable inner virtue,
built from specific moral and spiritual accomplishments." [NY Times Op Ed, April 11, 2015]
Which means any one of us can walk that road...

And make no mistake,
in so doing you are not alone aspiring to a life of deepened purpose,
but helping to reclaim the core of our Covenant;
the *Chutzpah* which can transform our world.

In his conclusion, Brooks relates the condensed message of his work
in a 15 point *Code to Character*...

For our purposes, compressing the journey to its core
I see it as three essential steps,
Preceded by a *leap*, and followed by a *bound*.

Character cultivation begins, no surprise to us at this New Year moment,
by the *leap of looking inside*...

Getting dressed to come here tonight,
We looked in the mirror to make sure we were presentable:
our shoes, other accessories, our purse, shirt-tie combo, a proper compliment,
our outfit fit-to-be-seen.

But how many of us looked through the mirror inside?...

The mid-20th century Presbyterian Pastor of Riverside Church,
the great Harry Emerson Fosdick preached in “*On Being a Real Person*,” [1943]
“The beginning of worthwhile living is through confrontation,
Yet, multitudes of people wrestle with every conceivable factor
before they face their primary problem---themselves....

To be a real person is to be engaged in a perpetual process of becoming....”

Jews call it *Cheshbon HaNefesh—Soulful Stock-taking*.

It runs against the grain of what our Me-centered, media driven,
Selfie-world reinforces—rather than touting our own wares,
forcing us to focus on ourselves for real—to face our flaws.

What’s your core weakness;

The piece of your inner outfit that just doesn’t match?...

CHUTZPAH is born by looking inside

and having the guts to admit what you’re wearing.

Honestly owning up...is everything.

The beginning of transcending the shortcomings that impede our becoming “real”
is in understanding it’s OK to be a bit broken, as all of us are.

Thereby we can aspire to be *strong in the weak places*;

To compensate for our faults without pretending they are not there...

For its THEN we can look at the mirror of our souls

responding to the ultimate question, not by asking:

WHAT do I want from life, BUT...WHAT does life want from me? [[The Road to Character](#), Brooks, Intro xiii-xiv]

...Every fall, I have a conversation with my 5th year class,

The rabbinic students I am privileged to teach in HUC’s Senior Seminar.

After studying *Lech L’Cha* as a jumpstart—when God calls Avram “*Go Forth*”

we enter into a dialogue with the provocative probe:

SO, do you have a Calling?....

Most say no...as a knee-jerk reaction out of concern
that someone else will regard them as a religious fanatic...

But on deeper consideration, and with some prodding,
many fess up...They are called...

Some are called by indignation, others by inspiration.

Some are even called by consternation...

But what the about-to-be rabbis begin to understand

is that their life-path is a vocation, a life to which they are somehow summoned...

As are we...

CHUTZPAH begins by recognizing we are all on a mission,

No matter what we do for a living, no matter who we are, to make life more...

to make a difference by being here, by being who we are....

Our three essential steps are character imperatives,
Ever-present aspirations which guide our daily encounters,
Knowing we will never fully get there.

Thus, as our role models, three who left us this past year
Who—in their lives, striving—reaching, just being themselves, pretty much arrived....

CHUTZPAH I: Be HUMBLE....

As a young Ass't Rabbi, I heard that Rosel Wolf tutored prayer book Hebrew, so,
knowing the great hurdle it was, I innocently asked if she could help my first conversion
student master the Shema... "Of course Jeffrey. Whatever I can do for you..."

But Rose did not simply sit and review in some classroom.

Hebrew learning with Rosel was a life-experience.

You'd meet in her home in Orienta,

As she'd greet you with home-baked cookies.

And in between reading practice, there was Arthur by her side,
sharing tales about escaping Nazi Germany from under the nose of the Gestapo...

Rose taught the V'ahavtah—God's love,
by sharing loving moments of the four generations of family she had nurtured,
or the old days of LT life since they started things up, joining in 1950....

Just about every Jew-by-Choice over the years became part of Rosel's extended family,
So it was no surprise that as each student took Torah in hand at their conversion,
There stood Rosel [and Arthur] alongside...

And whenever I tried to compliment her on teaching so well,
Rose would always answer: "This was the best student I ever had."

It was never about her effective teaching—but her students' skill in learning.

Yet Rosel became more than a teacher;

She forged that link in the chain of generations
that would have otherwise remained unbridgeable.

Feeding her students with self-effacing *neshoma*,
With nurturing grace, Rosel became their *Bobba*,
A Jewish Grandma with whom many remained close
long after the conversion moment was over.

You could easily make the case, without Rose,

That conversion would be somehow incomplete....

When I went to visit Rosel a few months ago as she neared the very end,

Her devoted daughters by her bedside,

propped up on pillows with her eyes closed—her breathing shallow,

I greeted her in a whisper as I customarily would: "Rosel, Nu?..."

Her eyes opened and, seeing me, the first words out of her mouth:

"Jeffrey, tell me, how are the children doing?"

Being alive meant putting everyone else first, even to her very last breath.

Rosel wanted to do her little part...Not quite 5', ever humble of heart,

She has no idea what a giant she was to us all....

CHUTZPAH II: Be HEART-FUL....

So many of us silence the whisperings of our hearts.
We feel deeply, but fail to respond compassionately.
Of course we care, yet we are too busy or fearful to show it.
“Yet love demands that we make [an almost] poetic surrender
To an inexplicable power without counting the cost.” [The Road to Character, pg 172]
A power that enlarges the heart, opens the spirit,
And fills us with a ceaseless capacity to care...
“Choosing life,” our Holy Days imperative, means choosing love,
A love that makes us who we are...maybe even makes us more.

Susan Sirkman was the most heart-full person I have ever known,
Because when it came to loving—caring, she could not stop herself.
 Stray dogs wandering the village streets...
 Teenage girls devastated by the emotional drama...
 Older congregants who found in her an old-soul friend...
 Circles of friends who confided in her because her concern was unwavering,
 Her love was [for] real...

Being her children, it carried you through whatever life might throw at you.

Being her husband, it held me up.

And because my Dolly’s love was so fierce, her care unrelenting,

It not alone sustained all of us but kept *her* going as well...

 When Gabe & Chelsea married on this very spot,
 Last summer, end of August, just a week before Susan
 was to attempt the start of a last-ditch clinical trial that would prove too toxic to take,
 with a very small family-only circle gathered ‘round,
 I—rabbi/dad—began speaking to my son & his beloved.
 But after five words, tears overtook me. Nothing would come out.
 Until, from behind, I felt a hand rubbing my back,
 And my wife’s whisper, “It’s OK Honey...You can do it.”
 And as she stood by my side, I delivered the drash
 To my Gabriel who’d found his true love,
 As my soul mate held me up...

Being heartfelt is the ultimate chutzpah, as Susan inherently understood,

For the more you love, the more you can love, and so,

The more you’ll be loved.

Choosing love, my Dolly chose life....

CHUTZPAH III: Be BRAVE....

HOW can we summon the courage to live by our convictions

In the face of a world that so often contradicts them?

True character is often forged by fire.

Hardship can render us helpless, or somehow,

Through our struggling, teach us how/how not/ to live.

Victor Frankel, Viennese psychiatrist who was sent to the camps in 1942
Lost his mother, wife and brother in the Nazi onslaught.

But as he affirmed in his 1946 Man's Search For Meaning,

Try as they might, what the Nazi's could not kill was his dignity.

The ultimate moral task, he discerned,

was the courage to be victorious over one's sufferings

"by turning life into an inner triumph." [The Road to Character, Brooks, pgs 22-23]

Having grown up on her father's 540 acre farm estate in Sudetenland,

An idyllic, privileged childhood, only to be locked in Ghetto Lodz where her father died,
and then, along with her mother and brother deported in the fall of '44 to Auschwitz,

Vera Stein Werner survived by refusing to surrender [her spirit].

Safeguarding her mother at all costs, doing anything to garner food scraps,

For Vera death was just not an option...

And beginning in January of 1945, when life became one long death march,

Trudging in the snow on foot from Auschwitz to Dachau to Gross Rosen,

Virtually being carried by her mother,

With death all around, her mother's mantra was simply: "You must live!..."

Yes, her mother died just as the camps were liberated...

Yes, the struggle to transcend the scars of such unimaginable inhumanity was daunting.

But nourishing and nurturing the generations of her family,

Along with Jack, Vera courageously created a new life...

In part, with the threat of deportation looming for the early years of her time in the States,

Even married with three children, Vera's vulnerability persisted,

Encouraging in her an openness to the stranger,

and a belief in giving every individual a chance...

Yet the true testament to her bravery was, after living through hell, in refusing to hate...

In the early sixties, as the Eichmann Trial echoed from Jerusalem,

Vera was summoned to LT Religious School by Mr. Cohen, the Principal,

Because her youngest daughter, Andi, spoke up against the historic life-lesson her teacher,
was trying to teach the class, that the German people, en masse, were to be hated.

Protecting her child, Vera met with the Principal, explaining

'She did not hate the Germans because if she allowed herself to start hating,

It would start with the Germans and then be followed by all the other people
who stood by and did nothing, virtually condemning the rest of the world.

And once you start hating, you could not stop.'

To survive the darkest night, the depths of inhumanity

And not allow it to diminish your dignity; to not let hate fill your heart...

To not judge others, but to look at each person with a potential for innate goodness,

Even when others looked at you as just a number.

Such indomitable spirit ennobles us all through the courage to live...

SO our call to character can be a reclamation of our Covenant's core,

But only if, after that *Leap* of seeing ourselves for who we truly are,

We can make that final **Bound:**

To Believe that as we matter—our actions/aspirations,
our hopes/dreams,
So must every single soul who shares this life:
No one insignificant,
no one to be despised,
no one unworthy of love.

For then, facing and embracing our world,
humility will become second nature
As we naturally put others first...
Then a river of compassion will flow
a *love* keeping us afloat...from heart to heart...
Then courage will uphold human dignity
Brave enough to know every person plays a part...

We are ALL on a mission
To get back our nerve:
To believe that our decisions, our daily encounters,
make a world of difference;
To recognize that what counts is our character;
To realize that we share a sacred responsibility
To unearth God's light hiding in the darkness
igniting a hope that will warm us all...

So this New Year,
reclaiming our *CHUTZPAH*,
Partnering with God to save our own souls,
Person by person—heart to heart,
starting here & now,
May we likewise save our world.

.....AMEN