

L'shana Tova!

So once a mother gave her adult son two sweaters on the first night of Chanukah. He's going back over to his mom's house later in the week for another Chanukah celebration and he makes sure to wear one of the sweaters. Instead of greeting him with a smile, his mother looks at him with a scowl and says, "What's the matter, you didn't like the other one?"

Please note, this is not autobiographical and I'm not just saying that because my mom is here tonight. No, the point is that in spite of our best intentions, sometimes we just can't get it right. Sometimes we make bad decisions, sometimes we make the right decision and it still falls apart on us. The opposite happens as well and we're successful in spite of ourselves, but as we think back over the past year, it's safe to say that none of us have been perfect.

Of course, we're in good company...

Abraham – not perfect. He's a Hero! He's the first Jew; he's devoted to his wife Sarah. He's a warrior and saves his nephew, Lot. He's a mensch – known for his generosity and hospitality. And he's dedicated to God. He travels hundreds of miles because God says so. He circumcises himself because God says so – very dedicated. And yet he challenges God when he thinks God's too hasty about destroying Sodom and Gemorrah. He's a Hero! At the same time, he's not perfect...

Abraham also lies, he kicks his family out of the house, he laughs at God, and while he challenges God about destroying towns, there's no challenge when he's told to sacrifice his son.

But it's not just Abraham – all of the matriarchs and patriarchs are flawed people. Even Moses who talks to God face to face makes plenty of mistakes. But in our Bible – no one is perfect and I mean no one. Even God loses God's temper, even God has regrets... In the Talmud (Berachot 7a), our rabbis imagine that God says a prayer to, well, God, asking that God's own sense of compassion and mercy will be stronger than God's desire for strict justice. God has to work to keep God's self under control. It just goes to show that not only our heroes, but even our God is capable of mistakes.

Tonight, I want to give honor to some of our imperfect heroes. A group of people who have metaphorically and literally been under fire lately. I'm talking about police officers. The people who make up the police force are fallible. They are people and they make mistakes. These are also people who will be the first ones to respond in case of a terrorist attack, a natural disaster, a domestic violence situation, a robbery, a traffic accident, drug related crimes, mental health emergencies, and so much more. They track down murderers, provide first aid, keep drunk drivers off the road, find lost children, run towards danger when needed. The police protect

protesters even when they are protesting against the police and they also keep our congregation safe on nights like this.

Often times, ordinary police officers do extraordinary things. There was nothing but praise for the way police apprehended Ahmad Khan Rahami after the bombings in New York and New Jersey a couple weeks ago. In a very different sort of life threatening situation, two police officers from Michigan came upon a woman with an infant on her lap in a parked car. They were ready to give her a citation for not having a car seat when they learned that the family couldn't afford to buy one. These cops chose compassion verses strict justice. They went and bought a car seat with their own money, then they came back to the parking lot and installed it themselves.¹

Another situation took place in Pennsylvania this past summer when four of cops were eating at a restaurant. The greeter moves to sit a couple next to the cops, but the couple saw the cops and said, "we don't want to sit here." It was a response to all of the negativity that the police have received recently. And it wasn't just a whispered statement. The couple made it very clear to everyone present that they did not want to sit near the police. The officers could have gotten upset. Instead, they understood that not everyone had had positive experiences with the police and they wanted to change that. So when the couple got their bill, it was already paid for, with a note that said, "Sir, your check was paid for by the police officers that you didn't want to sit next to. Thank you for your support. I left a \$10 tip, too."² What menschen! This simple act was greatly appreciated by the couple and it gave them a positive encounter with the police.

These g'milut chesed, acts of lovingkindness by officers happen daily, but they're hardly ever reported. For the daily sacrifice and all of the times they truly protect and serve their community, police officers deserve our thanks and appreciation. They're heroes, but they're not perfect. The sentiment of the couple who didn't want to sit near the officers comes from somewhere. Not every cop is a good cop and when there have been one hundred and twenty-six people who were killed by the police while unarmed since the beginning of 2016, it's a problem.

In some communities, like Baltimore, the issues are widespread. According to the Department of Justice report published this summer one guy, he's African American, in his mid-fifties, this one guy gets stopped by the police thirty different times within a few years.³ No citations, no criminal charges – he's not doing anything wrong. Not exactly the most positive or trust

¹ <https://gma.yahoo.com/michigan-police-officers-buy-family-car-seat-instead-203217907.html>

² <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2016/07/12/man-refuses-to-sit-next-to-officers-at-restaurant-heres-the-message-he-later-finds-on-the-check/>

³ <https://www.justice.gov/opa/file/883366/download>, p. 7

building experience. In addition, the Baltimore Police Department was cited for using excessive force against individuals with mental health disabilities or in the midst of a mental health crisis, for using unreasonable force against juveniles, and for using unreasonable force against people who present little or no threat to officers or others.⁴ Such errors are systemic. There's a reason why people are protesting.

Police are heroes, but they are not perfect. And when the police make mistakes, the consequences are severe. Sue Rahr, the Director of the Washington State Criminal Justice Training Commission, understands that "law enforcement is the only position in our society that can legally take away life and liberty."⁵ She also is someone who embodies the spirit of Cheshbon HaNefesh – an accounting of one's soul and teshuvah – repentance for the Washington State's Police Departments.

It started with seven years as sheriff of King County, Washington – seven years reviewing allegations of excessive force where she would ask her officers: Why use force so quickly? Why not diffuse the situation in another way? Over and over again her officers would respond with three words: Ask, Tell, Make. The way that police officers in Washington and in many parts of the country were trained, they would ask someone to do something. If the person didn't comply right away, they would tell them to do it. If the person again didn't comply right away, the officer would physically make the person do it. It was strategies like this that she felt were a part of the problem.

When she became the head of Washington's Criminal Justice Training Commission in 2012, she asked, "Why were we training police recruits like soldiers? Soldiers conquer. Police protect."⁶ She argues that no one wants to be conquered, demeaned, or intimidated, which in her mind explained the growing divide between cops and citizens. Relying on social science evidence that people care more about how they are treated by the police than the crime rate, she set out to transform police into guardians, rather than warriors. Her philosophy and the changes she's made in police training have not been without controversy, but similar changes and a new focus on community policing have already made a real difference in Dallas.

Dallas Police Chief David Brown, who will be retiring in a few weeks, instituted a number of reforms after several police shootings in 2012. DPD adopted new guidelines⁷ to report use of force incidents and bring in the FBI Civil Rights Division to review all police-involved shootings.

⁴ <https://www.justice.gov/opa/file/883366/download>, p. 8-9

⁵ <http://crosscut.com/2015/04/can-sue-rahr-reinvent-policing/>

⁶ https://fortress.wa.gov/cjtc/www/images/2015_New_Uploads/pf%20article%20-%20suerahrguardians.pdf

⁷ http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2016/07/the_dallas_police_department_has_been_a_model_for_reducing_officer_involved.html

They emphasized de-escalation techniques in their training and increased transparency with the community. Excessive force complaints have dropped 64% in the past five years and the number of police shootings have decreased at an even higher rate.⁸

Director Sue Rahr and Police Chief David Brown are doing the work of teshuvah. They took an accounting of the soul of their profession, they saw opportunities for improvement, and they've started to change a culture that is resistant to change. And it's not just the culture, they're also battling other factors, like low compensation and even lower morale.

I remember hearing the following from Police Chief Brown on July 8th, 2016 the day after fourteen people were shot and five officers, Brent Thompson, Patrick Zamarripa, Michael Krol, Sergeant Michael Smith, and Senior Corporal Lorne Ahrens were killed. He said, "We're hurting. Our profession is hurting. Dallas officers are hurting. We are heartbroken. There are no words to describe the atrocity that occurred to our city. All I know is that this must stop, this divisiveness between our police and our citizens." He continued, "We don't feel much support most days. Let's not make today most days. Please, we need your support to protect you from men like these, who carried out this tragic, tragic event."⁹

In some ways, it's because of his words that I'm giving this sermon this evening. Police departments throughout our country have a lot of very serious work to do. They need to continue to update their training, acknowledge and better understand the racial issues at the core of communal discord, they need to work with the communities they serve to increase communication and transparency. Many police officers know this and have expressed great compassion for those who have been victims. And no matter how many advances are made, we all know that just like a Jewish mother, not everyone is going to be satisfied. Police officers are not perfect, but when we look at what they are trying to do every single day – serve their community, protect their community... we need to recognize them as the heroes they are and recognize how they are struggling to do better.

Because here we are on Rosh Hashanah, only looking at ourselves. How can we do better as people – for our family, for our community, for ourselves? When we compare our personal work to the police, our task during these Days of Awe seems small. How do we do our own Cheshbon HaNefesh, an accounting of our soul? How can we move from complacency to teshuvah, repentance?

⁸ <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/dallas-police/490583/>

⁹ <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/07/08/485220431/were-hurting-dallas-police-chief-david-brown-says>

Imperfect Heroes by Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker
Rosh Hashanah Evening, 5777

We should be inspired the police. Inspired by their commitment and dedication. Inspired because in spite of their imperfections, like Abraham and Moses, they are heroes. And inspired because in the face of challenge, so many officers are trying to heal, transform, and grow. In the year ahead, I hope we all can address our own challenges in a way that allows us the healing we need, the transformation that comes, and to grow on our own path of goodness and righteousness.

L'shana Tova Umtukah – I pray that we and all of our imperfect heroes are blessed with a sweet year, a peaceful year, a year of health, safety, and security for all. L'shana Tova!