

**The Decline of Character in an Age of Cultural Climate
Change and What We Can Do About It
Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5778
By Rabbi David Kosak**

On August 29th, I had been downtown participating in a silent march with many of the city's clergy. Hundreds of us marched arm in arm, pleading through our presence for a civics of compassion. At the conclusion, I ordered a car from Lyft ride service back to my home.

Aurelio, the gentleman who picked me up, was an illegal immigrant. We got to talking on all sorts of topics. He wasn't particularly concerned about our country's new immigration policies. In fact, he was as happy as could be although he admitted that he might face deportation. Mind you, this conversation was also occurring precisely when Hurricane Harvey was devastating one of our nation's largest cities. He took joy in the powerful storms, melting ice caps, boldness of the Klu Klux Klan and our nation's tighter immigration rules.

"It's the end of days," he told me with a big smile. "You better accept Jesus as your savior, because you want to be among the saved." Check out Galatians in the New Testament." I thanked him for his heartfelt advice. Then he dropped me off. True story.

I keep thinking about that encounter. He was a lovely man and his conviction was genuine. His may not be a Jewish view, but in some important ways, Aurelio is right. Our world IS on fire.

The flood waters ARE rising. But it is not this sort of climate change I wish to discuss today. Rather, to repurpose a phrase coined by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, our world is imperiled by Cultural Climate Change.

Anti-semitism IS on the rise. Antifa Protesters in Berkeley smash windows, and cost the city hundreds of thousands of dollars to repair damage and keep the peace. We DISDAIN truth, science and fact at an increasingly terrifying rate. Our country is more DIVIDED than any time in recent history.

What keeps me up at night is the crisis behind these crises. In some ways, it is the central crisis of our time. It's not one the news or social media talk much about, though if you know where to listen, it is being discussed.

I'm talking about the decline of character. Character has been under attack for a long time. There are many forces that have created this existential cultural climate change. As a society, we will need to address our national decline in character if we want to effectively handle the other challenges we face. Because capacities that make up character, such as compromise, resilience and self-sacrifice will be required of us all.

What I'd like to do this morning, therefore, is make the case for character. Character counts. It matters. It impacts how we talk to one another, especially across our differences. It influences how we care for one another, on the individual and societal levels. It even effects how happy and successful we are with our lives.

First, I want to share a few of the many indicators and studies that point convincingly to the decline in character. The evidence is substantial and scientifically validated.

Second, I want to offer you some Jewish insights about the value of character and a remarkable contemporary role model.

Finally, I'll offer some concrete actions and some take-away materials we can each use personally and communally in this worthwhile battle against this era of cultural climate change.

The Decline of Character

When sociologists study the decline of character, and how its importance has been eclipsed by other values, they have many measurement tools they can use. It's important to spend a few moments going over those so that we are clear about the extent of this problem.

Are you familiar with Google Ngram searches? This algorithm tracks all printed material from 1800 through 2008 at latest count. Studies show, for instance, that the usage of business terms and individualistic words and phrases have increased¹, while psychologists have tracked a precipitous drop in moral language.² Words like courage, character and conscience are used far less frequently than they were even a few decades ago. Let me repeat that. As a culture, we don't talk much about values such as courage or character anymore. The use of words

¹ David Brooks, What Our Words Tell Us, New York Times, May 20, 2013

² Pelin Kesebir and Selin Kesebir "The Cultural Saliency of Moral Character and Virtue Decline in Twentieth Century America." Journal of Positive Psychology 2012. See also Brooks, pages 6-7.

like regret and remorse have declined, as have cooperation, compromise and acceptance.

Susan Cain is an author who has garnered some national attention for her salient book, “The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking.” In her research, she has tracked the decline in character by examining the self-help literature of different eras. Early in American history, according to many historians, we “lived in a culture of character...where we still at that point, valued people for their inner lives and moral rectitude.” The self-help books of that time reflected this different values universe, and had titles such as “Character, The Grandest Thing in the World.”³ The heroes of the age were individuals like Abraham Lincoln, who, like Moses, were admired for their modest and unassuming characters. In other words, people recognized that such modesty was an earned characteristic, not an innate one.

According to this line of reasoning, it was the dislocation of people from rural communities and societies to urban centers that saw the birth of the “culture of personality.” In the bustling city, full of strangers, we were no longer known for our inner qualities. Social currency was no longer character, but charisma and magnetism. With this change, the new self-help books were written by the masters of charisma, the salespeople. The most famous of those titles was, “How to Win Friends and Influence People.” I read it in my twenties.

³ Susan Cain Ted Talk, minute 11:02

Our bond and connection to other people, in other words, was no longer based on who they were and what we owed them, but how they could help us and what value we could extract from them. This is the less told tale when we speak about how globalism has left behind the under-educated, because it doesn't sound as dramatic or appealing. Let's remember that it wasn't so many decades ago when heads of large companies turned down salary increases. Some of that may have been because of the tax code, but it was also because they knew that taking more money without also rewarding their workers was unseemly, improper and demonstrated a failure of their character. It's also fair to note that along with this decline in character, there's been a decrease in the average number of close friends a person has.

Fair to say, a society that becomes less concerned with character will begin to show a coarsening in its speech and dress habits. As you hopefully know, one of the centerpieces of my own rabbinate and an area of intense study has been around the skills needed for respectful dialogue. I am coming to appreciate, however, that these conversational skills are themselves the products of societies where character matters first.

What is clear is that our loss of these conversational skills, along with the diminution of many character traits such as empathy, kindness, fairness, social responsibility and self-control has left our nation perched on the precipice of a new form of civil war. We may no longer pit north against south, and the level of violence may still low, but it's clear that the struggle for our nation's soul sets city folks against country folk, the educated against the undereducated, the globalists against the nationalists, the white man against everybody else.

In each of these pitched battles, however, both sides lose, precisely because we all do less well when we haven't sufficiently developed the character of our inner resources.

The Value of Character and the Success It Brings Us

Indeed, we now understand that those who have developed traits of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence will generally do better in life. They will, as a whole, be more successful in their careers and in their relationships. They are less likely to end up with addictions, and they tend to be healthier and more content with their lot in life. They have greater resilience to weather the storms of life.

Everyone of us, after all, will face impossible odds at some point.

The question that these High Holidays demand of us is, "Are we ready to meet life's challenges with dignity and optimism? Are we up to struggle for a noble cause? Can we refrain from saying the nasty word that need not be uttered, or better yet, can we train our thinking so that we give people the benefit of the doubt? Will we be able to confront illness and bodily decay, the loss of a loved one or of a well-paying job...even the turmoil of our society with some element of grace and equipoise?"

As Americans, the odds are against us because in our society, the importance and role of developing our character is fundamentally broken.

What are some Jewish understandings of character

But here's some good news. Those of us gathered here today are part of the solution. We have a not-so-secret weapon...It's called Judaism. Jewish culture is nothing if it is not about developing communities of people who are obligated to care for one another. That very premise means that we spend time talking about the values that inform and shape our interior landscape--values such as *tzedek*, justice, *chochma*, wisdom, *elu v'elu*--pluralism, *na'aseh v'nishmah*--the courage to act when the outcome is unknown, *anivut*--humility and *hitapkut*, self-control, and *teshuvah*--reflection aimed towards moral self-improvement

For us as Jews, it's not enough to talk about these aspects of character, and it's not sufficient to focus these qualities in the outer world. The goal is that our inner world is changed, and that will automatically impact how we behave in the social realm. We are Yisrael, the people who struggle with God, and end up transformed from that encounter.

As one expression of this idea, we have the words of the Netivot Shalom. For the Slonimer Rebbe, character is actually the preparation we engage in so that we can fulfill the mitzvot. In other words, if we haven't worked on who we are as people, we actually cannot learn the Torah. I am pretty sure that he's not talking about intellectual learning, but the transformative learning by which we are changed for the better in our encounter with the living beating source of our tradition. Torah is meant to change us. It is the guide to developing our character.

The masters of Mussar, whose entire purpose was to help us improve our character, state it rather strongly. “It is easier for a person to become expert in the entire Talmud than it is for him to uproot one negative trait from his being.” As we rise up and refine ourselves, our darker impulses try to hold us back.

In the Hasidic world, this idea is developed and pushed even further. In much of hasidic thought, our capacity to be connected to God--*devekut*, or clinging to God--is determined by how refined our character has become. Part of the reason for this belief is that being connected to God in hassidut means that we are emulating God’s qualities. We tend to think that a good person is someone who does the right thing, and keeps their darker impulses in check. But it is more than this.

One level of moral achievement is when we want to curse the person who cut us off in traffic, but we don’t. That is commendable enough. The higher achievement is when the impulse to curse is lessened or no longer exists.

That sounds hard to believe, doesn’t it? We don’t dream big enough about our humanity and our moral potential anymore. During one of our Israel360 events this past year, a congregant read a handout we provided on how to have productive and respectful conversations. After reading it over, and when she thought I couldn’t hear her, she turned to her friend and said, “This is impossible.”

Impossible? No, but difficult, yes. All great achievements are. Here again, though, those of us sitting here today are part of the solution our country needs. We are a solution, because the

people our Jewish culture has venerated the most are those who are true spiritual entrepreneurs, those whose crazy idea was to build a better version of themselves and society that never existed before. Isn't that part of what these days of *teshuvah* are all about?

Locked in But Set Free: The Soul's Journey

Here's the story of one such contemporary individual.

A few months back, I heard a remarkable TED talk by photographer Kitra Cahana. She was telling the story of her father. Though I didn't know it then, turns out that she is Rabbi Michael Cahana's niece. And Kitra's father, Rabbi Ronnie Cahana, is Michael's brother. Ronnie is a conservative rabbi who continues to serve in Montreal.

Kitra and her dad have a remarkably close and touching bond. Hardship would test their love and prove how durable and true it was. It was the summer of 2011, July to be precise, when Rabbi Ronnie Cahana suffered a massive and total stroke. It so devastated his body that he had become "locked in." His mind was untouched, but apart from his eyes, his body was completely paralyzed.

When Kitra was first admitted to his room, after having been warned what she would find, she saw her beloved father immobilized. He had breathing tubes and feeding tubes. A mess of electronic equipment monitored him and kept him alive. Somehow, she gathered herself against a flux of emotion that might well have paralyzed her as well. Against that onslaught,

and despite her tears and quivering voice, she began reciting the alphabet. A-B-C...when she reached K her father blinked. She began again. A-B-C...I and a blink. In this way, his father's first communication to her was, "Kitra, my beauty, don't cry. This is a blessing." Later he would add, speaking of his frozen wooden limbs, "paradise is in this body. It is in this world."

In the months that followed, his family--including his brother--my friend and colleague Rabbi Michael Cahana--would gather and spend hours by his bedside. Each one became a caller of letters, saying the alphabet over and over so that Ronnie's sermons and poetry and blessings and thoughts could find voice despite his stilled vocal chords.

As he communicated, it became clear to Kitra and to everyone around him that he didn't view his life as over in any way. Indeed, this total stroke freed him from the frenetic pace of a congregational rabbi. *Because his body was dead wood, his soul floated free.*

Indeed, just this past summer during parshat Re'eh, he shared a davar torah with the world. It begins like this:

"Emotional paralysis is far worse than physical paralysis. Immediately upon seeing my situation, I found blessing. G-d gave me a second chance. I said to my beautiful wife and delicate children, "Don't let this shackle our family's G-d-given life-force. Baruch Hashem, we are alive together. We still have sacred tasks to do." A bit later he adds, "To live humanly is to believe in purity. To live Jewishly, as taught in the Torah portion of Re'eh, is to choose the blessing over the curse. I

choose blessing and instinctively feel blessed. G-d has allowed me life again. “”

“What has happened to me has only strengthened my faith,” he said. “Every fraction of an inch of growth is a gift from God.”

The argument I want to conclude with today is that Rabbi Ronnie Cahana’s outlook is not something that he was born with. Rather, by the time his debilitating stroke came, he had spent decades developing his character around the quality of gratitude. He grew up in an environment where gratitude, character and moral development were encouraged.

By the time his debilitating stroke hit, Rabbi Cahana was ready for it.

Is such a remarkable level of character achievement possible for most of us? Without effort? No. With consistent and sustained effort? Some of us may get there. Yet the story of Rabbi Ronnie Cahana should teach us that no matter where we are today--no matter how locked-in we all are in bad habits, coarse behaviors or relentless negative thinking, we can change. That bears repeating. *No matter how locked-in we all are in bad habits, coarse behaviors or relentless negative thinking, we can change.* This is the promise of *teshuvah*, and such an improved attitude is the fruit of character.

The importance of working on our character development is more important than ever. Our society needs more people with refined characters. Our families need us to be such individuals.

And although the voice is often hard to hear, our souls are pleading with us. Our humanity demands we believe once again in the possibility of moral grandeur.

What does that mean, the possibility of moral grandeur?

For me, living with the possibility of moral grandeur means we have a noble vision of our best selves and of the best form of society. It means tempering our pessimism with optimism, our cynicism with faith and trust, our certainty with curiosity. Such a vision may be at odds with the cheapened and coarse image that sometimes is portrayed as human nature in today's world.

But it is also a goal that past ages set for themselves, and it is not beyond reach.

It entails a commitment to the sustained work that it takes to remold ourselves. Here are four easy steps:

1. Make your character a priority. Put it towards the top of your list.
2. Engage in conversations with people about your efforts to improve your character, and hold that discussion with yourself as well.
3. Reflect on your failures and successes. Some people like to do this at night before going to sleep or on Friday night. Making it a regular habit is essential.
4. Try again. In the biographies of Abe Lincoln, Dorothy Day, A. Philip Randolph, General George Marshall, Rabbi Aryeh Levin and other heroes of the spirit, we see how these people kept at the art of moral self-improvement.

As you leave today, you'll find a handout that lists 24 character traits and provides questions, activities and conversation starters related to those Jewish values. I hope you'll find a buddy, a character partner to engage in this work with you. Won't you add one conversation a week in which you talk about what you have done to become more grateful, hopeful, kind, curious, honest, fair or forgiving? One conversation?

Our world is threatened by rapidly moving cultural climate change. It is created by the pollution of selfishness, hostility, entitlement, hubris, chronic stress, anxiety and a host of other social poisons.

Yet I don't think it's too late for us. I believe that if we each endeavor to reduce our moral carbon footprint, we will find again the language that can unite our hearts and hands. In a world that desperately needs moral exemplars, I believe that the good people of our Neveh Shalom community can make a real difference.

Na'aseh v'nishmah. Let's give it a try, and see what happens. Shanah tovah u'metukah.