SECOND DAY ROSH HASHANAH

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Many of you might be familiar with the nursery song that we sing to teach young children the parts of the body. It goes like this (and feel free to sing along with me; and, if any of you want to stand up and do the motions, be my guest):

Head, shoulders, knees, and toes (2x)

Eyes and ears and mouth and nose,

Head, shoulders, knees, and toes

As I shared with you yesterday, we will be discussing several of these same parts of the body over the course of these High Holy Days. Yesterday I shared with you what in my opinion is a very instructive Midrash. This rabbinic statement teaches that there are three parts of our bodies over which we exert control, namely, our mouth, our hands, and our feet; and there are three items over which we do not exercise control, specifically our eyes, ears, and nose. Yesterday, I spoke about how we must control both what we put into our mouth and what we allow to emerge from our mouth. Today my focus will be on our hands and feet.

Take a look at your hands. Each of your hands contains five fingers and a total of twenty-seven bones. Your fingers contain some of the densest areas of nerve endings in the human body, and are the richest source of [tactile](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tactile) feedback. Human hands and fingers have the greatest positioning capability of the body, and they are more dexterous than those of any other mammal. The dexterity of the human hand has allowed mankind to develop evolutionarily throughout the millennia to our unrivalled position as the pinnacle of creation. Both physically and symbolically, the human hand is an extremely powerful appendage.

Take another look at your hands. As the Midrash teaches, you have control over this most powerful of human limbs. Clench your hands into a fist, and you have a potent symbol of the malevolence your hands can commit. Extend your open outward horizontally, and you have a compelling symbol of the positive actions your hands can provide.

As the Midrash states, we have a choice how we use our hands: רצה לעסוק בהם מלאכת שמים – if a person wants, he/she can use his/her hands to perform the work of heaven, holy deeds; רצה לעבור בהן עברות הרבה – alternatively, a person can utilize his/her hands to commit many sins.

How can we use our hands to perform the work of heaven? -- By involving our hands in the performance of mitzvot. As you know, mitzvot come in two varieties: there are the ritual commandments on the one hand, and the interpersonal commandments on the other. It is fascinating, when you consider it, how many of both types of commandments we can fulfill with our hands.

Consider how many home, Shabbat, holiday, and synagogue commandments you can fulfill with your hands! Ladies, if you light Shabbat candles on Friday night, or Holiday candles on Yom Tov, you are using your hands to engage in the heavenly task of bringing spiritual light into the world. Men and women, by making Kiddush on Shabbat and holidays, you are using your hands as you hold the Kiddush cup to fulfill the mitzvah of sanctifying a special day, making time holy. At the end of Shabbat, we hold the Kiddush cup and Havdalah candle in our hands, and take the spice box in our hands, as we mark the end of Shabbat. On this holiday of Rosh Hashanah the shofar blower holds the shofar in his hands as he helps the congregation fulfill its mitzvah of hearing the blasts of the ram’s horn. When we go home, we will take slices of apple in our fingers and dip them into honey as a symbolic prayer for a sweet new year. Next week, uniquely, on Yom Kippur, we men – and those women who choose to do so – will take our tallis in our hands and wrap it around ourselves, not only in the morning, as we do on almost all other days of the year, but in the evening as well, both for Kol Nidre and Mincha-Neilah. In two weeks, in celebration of the holiday of Sukkot, many of us will use our hands to build a sukkah, thus fulfilling yet another mitzvah and engaging in a holy act; during that holiday we will also take the lulav and etrog in our hands and shake them. In December, we will use our hands and fingers to fulfill the mitzvah of lighting the Chanukah candles, and again bring the light of holiness into the world. Think of how many ways you use your hands to prepare for, and observe, Passover! And when it comes to weekday prayer, obviously we use our hands to wrap the tefillin around our arm and place it on our heads. But more than that: when we want to bless someone, we do so with our hands. Later in today’s service, the kohanim will ascend the Bimah and bless the congregation by extending their hands. When parents bless their children on Friday night, they do so by placing their hands on the head of each of their children. Before we eat, we wash our hands in the ritual knows as נטילת ידים . The gematria, or numerical value, of the Hebrew word ידים , which means “hands”, is 64. I bet there are at least sixty-four ritual mitzvot that we can fulfill just by using our hands.

But there are also many other types of commandments we can fulfill by using our hands in a positive manner. There is the mitzvah of tzedakah, giving charity, whether it is by reaching our hands into our pockets to give money or using our fingers to take a pen in hand to write a check to a worthwhile organization. We can and should use our hands to assist other people; don’t we say in English, “to lend someone a helping hand”? And helping other people who are in need – whether they are poor, ill, disabled, refugees, oppressed, or the like – is a very big mitzvah; it is called in Hebrew גמילות חסדים -- performing acts of kindness towards others. That’s why we call our synagogue helping group יד ליד , literally “hand to hand,” because that’s what it does: it extends a helping hand to those who can use some assistance.

Of course, our hands can engage in nefarious actions as well, as the Midrash stated. Whether it is by using our hands to engage in activities which we should not undertake on Shabbat and holidays, or by using our hands to harm others, either physically or in a more underhanded manner (notice the English word “underhanded”) – our hands have the potential to wreak physical or spiritual havoc on our own lives and the lives of others.

We in this country have another way to use our hands. Exactly five weeks from today we will be handed a paper ballot which we will take in our hands, enter a somewhat private station, take a pencil in our fingers, and fill in an oval indicating for whom we are voting to become the President and Vice President of the United States, in addition to voting for other officials. We will then take our ballot in hand once again, place it into a manila folder, walk over to the scanner, and use our hands to insert our ballot into the vote reader. (Don’t you miss the old machines with the levers that we used our fingers to pull down?) As unsavory as both major candidates may be - and I base this statement on all polls that indicate that never in history have we had two candidates for President for whom the American public has a more unfavorable opinion – nonetheless, we must use our hands to set the direction that we want this country to follow. That is an awesome responsibility to place on our hands.

Of all the parts of the human body, the hand is mentioned most frequently in the Bible. In fact, some form of the Hebrew word יד, or “hand”, appears 1,634 times in the Hebrew Bible. Compare that with the feet (רגל - which I will talk about in a few minutes) – only 266 times; the tongue (לשון) – 117 times; the mouth (פה) – 502 times; the head (ראש) – 614 times; and the heart (לב) – 859 times in the Jewish Bible. Why is the hand mentioned so frequently? – Because, in a sense, it is the part of the human body that has the greatest potential to do good or evil, to engage in positive or negative actions, and to perform beneficial or detrimental deeds. In this sense, our hands are the most powerful parts of our bodies, and, guess what? – We control what our hands do.

One more action we can do with our hands. We can raise our hands. We can raise our hands for many reasons. For example, if someone were to pull out a gun and shout, “Stick ‘em up!”, I suggest that you raise your hands in compliance. But that’s not what I mean. We also raise our hands – or at least one hand – to indicate assent or to swear to do something. For example, if I were to ask you to indicate your agreement to a particular statement, you would raise a hand to demonstrate your concurrence. Right? Similarly, if I were to ask you to make or take a pledge to undertake some specific action, you would raise a hand to undertake that promise. Correct? Well, that’s what I am going to ask you to do right now. I want you to agree and to pledge that during the new Jewish year 5777 you will use your hands to do good – to perform more mitzvot, to engage more meaningfully and extensively in Jewish life and observance, to perform more acts of kindness, to extend your hand in friendship, kindness, and compassion – more in the dawning year than you may have in the past year.

And when it comes to our feet, as the Midrash teaches, we control them too: ביקש לילך לדבר מצוה הולך – If a person seeks to go to perform a mitzvah, his feet take him there; ביקש לילך לדבר עבירה הולך -- If a person wants to go to commit a sin, his feet transport him there. We determine where we want to go.

The Midrash itself gives some examples of what kind of sins a person might direct his feet to commit; it mentions three: לנאוף - to commit adultery or some other sexual offense; לרצח - to commit murder; and לגנב - to steal. While I certainly hope and assume that no one here has used his/her feet to carry him/her some place to commit adultery or rape or other sexual assault, or murder, or robbery, there are modern analogues: Given the fact that in the most recent and extensive survey, 62% of female college students have stated that they have been sexually harassed at college, and 23% have indicated that they have experienced some form of unwanted sexual contact through force, threat of force, or incapacitation due to alcohol consumption, I think any female college student has to be careful and discerning as to which college parties she directs her feet to take her. I admit that it is not fair to place the onus on a potential victim, so I am quick to add that males attending such parties have to make sure that when they direct their feet there they do so for the proper reasons.

When it comes to a modern analogue for the Midrash’s concern about someone directing his feet to commit murder, I suggest to you that anyone who has imbibed too much alcohol, and then walks to his car, gets in, and drives is using his feet to potentially commit murder. As I share with my students as a warning to them, some of the most painful experiences I have had as a Rabbi involve, in one case accompanying the police, and in another case arriving shortly thereafter, to inform a parent that his/her child has been killed by a drunk driver. Several years ago, I served as the interim Jewish chaplain for about eight months at what was then called the Nassau County Medical Center. I was issued a beeper. I quickly learned that if the beeper went off in the middle of the night it almost invariably meant that some kid had drunk too much alcohol and gotten behind the wheel of his car, and ended up in a terrible crash, usually with several passengers in his car. Unfortunately, I got to know the chief neuro-surgeon at NUMC quite well. He would say to me, “Rabbi, I’ll try my best, but this kid’s brain is like a pancake.” Trust me, it is not easy to sit and console the parents of the young driver or the parents of his passengers whose lives will never be the same, if they even survive, or to help them make the decision whether to donate their child’s organs if he/she does not survive. Never should any of us -- adult or young adult or teenager -- walk into our cars to drive if we have consumed too much alcohol, nor should we ever use our feet to enter the car of someone who has had too much to drink. I tell our Hebrew and Hebrew High School students, if you ever find yourself in such a situation, call your parents to come get you. Believe me, they would be much happier to pick you up even in the middle of the night than to visit you in the hospital or morgue. Don’t want to call your parents? – Then call me and I will come to get you. Just don’t get in the car as, or as a passenger with, a drunk driver.

And as for using one’s feet to steal, we can apply this to those who get hooked on drugs. Frequently, to support their habit, they have to steal – from their parents, from their family, from their friends. And when they become addicted, they, in effect, steal from themselves – from their abilities and capabilities, from their potential, from their future. And, given the magnified potency of illicit drugs today, if they die as a result of their addiction, they rob their families of any possibility for joy, happiness, and nachas. As I mentioned yesterday, drug addiction has returned in full force as an unspoken-about Jewish issue.

So to where should we direct our feet? Again, the Midrash makes some wonderful suggestions as to the type of mitzvah- and holiness-focused activities we can pursue. It states that we should direct our feet לבקר חולים - to visit the sick; לנחם אבלים - to comfort the bereaved; לקבר מתים – to bury the dead; ולגמילות חסדים – to perform acts of kindness for others.

Where else should we direct our feet? – Very obviously, to the synagogue. And more than just on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Here at the East Meadow Jewish Center, we are open 365 days a year! There is not a single day when this building is not utilized in one way or another. Come on Shabbos. Come on the other Jewish holidays. Direct your feet to the synagogue to pray; come here to learn. Attend programs here to connect with Jewish culture. Direct your feet here to socialize. Come here to be inspired. Direct your feet to the Center to grow spiritually.

One of the other Jewish places to which you should direct your feet is the State of Israel. If you have never been to Israel, by all means GO! Every Jew must visit Israel at least once in his/her life. And if you haven’t been to Israel recently, you simply must go again. Trust me, Israel is a different country from when you were there last. To walk with one’s feet in the same locales as did our patriarchs, matriarchs, and ancestors; to have the privilege to stand with one’s feet in the land that Moses could see only from afar; to tread with one’s feet in the very same places where Joshua, Deborah, David, Solomon, the great prophets, and generations of Israelites once walked, is to be spiritually uplifted; to see the development by our brothers and sisters of what had been a barren land is truly wondrous. And to stand with one’s feet and witness how modern Israelis deal with the many challenges they face is amazing to the nth degree. And, yes, I am contemplating another East Meadow Jewish Center pilgrimage to Israel either in 2018 or 2019.

In the meantime, if you have visited Israel recently, direct your feet to participate in our East Meadow Jewish Center pilgrimage to Poland and Berlin this coming May. We will walk through what had been the Warsaw Ghetto, we will walk through the new and very well-reviewed Po-Lin Museum in Warsaw that traces the over thousand-year-old history of the Jews of Poland. We will walk through the old section of the city of Krakow and walk into its surviving synagogues, most of which are now used for other purposes. We will visit the grave of our late beloved custodian, Stanley Bodson, who was so respectful of, and dedicated, to this synagogue. We will walk through the now-sacred grounds of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camps, where millions of our fellow Jews were murdered in the hell of the Holocaust. We will visit the cities of Wroclaw and Lodz, where so much Jewish history took place. We will travel to Rychnow-nad-Kneznou, in the Czech Republic, from where our Holocaust Torah comes; we will walk in the synagogue where our Holocaust Torah was read, and visit the cemetery where those who wrote it, read from it, and heard it are buried. We will then travel to Berlin to stand with our feet in the surviving synagogues and visit places associated with the Holocaust. I hope you will consider making the pilgrimage with us to experience Jewish history on our Poland and Berlin trip this spring.

How many of you have heard of the Hillel -- the man, not the Jewish college organization? Hillel, as many of you are aware, was the greatest rabbi of his generation; he lived about 2,000 years ago, and was a patient teacher and scholar, and a leader of the Jewish people.

Hillel uttered a great statement that I love, and I think really captures the sense of how we control our feet. It is a three-part statement.

“אם אני כאן הכל כאן ואם איני כאן מי כאן? – If I am here, then everyone is here; and if I am not here, who is here?” This is not a self-centered comment on Hillel’s part; Hillel did not have a hubristic bone in his body. In fact, he was the model of the patient, self-deprecating, leader. Instead, what Hillel is teaching us is not to be concerned about what others may be doing. If you are engaging in the proper action, if you are in the right place – that’s enough; and if you are not in the right place or not engaging in the proper actions, then you have to be concerned about what you yourself are doing, not others.

Then Hillel adds – and I love this statement – “למקום שאני אוהב שם רגלי מוליכות אותי – To the place I love, that’s where my feet take me.” In other words, if you love to do mitzvahs, your feet will lead you there; if you love to come to shul, your feet will carry you here. On the other hand, if you love to do wrong or engage in risky behavior – then your feet will carry you there, too. We control our feet, Hillel is agreeing; we just have to make sure we direct them in the proper path and to the proper goals.

And speaking of the synagogue, Hillel (though in his time it referred to the Temple in Jerusalem) adds that God says, “אם אתה תבוא אל ביתי אני אבוא אל ביתך – God says, “If you come to My house (meaning the Temple or synagogue), I will come with blessing to your house.”

So, my friends, you must admit that the ancient Rabbis were correct: we DO control our hands and feet. God instilled in each of us free will, which means that we, and we alone, determine our actions and how we want to use our hands and feet. I hope and pray that in the new year that is now adawning all of us will decide to use those parts of our bodies that we do control for good purposes, to engage in holy work, to make this a better world.

If we use our hands to engage in mitzvot, to perform deeds of kindness, and to build a better world, then we can pray the words of the psalmist:

ויהי נעם אדני אלהינו עלינו ומעשה ידינו כוננה עלינו ומעשה ידינו כוננהו – May the favor of the Lord, our God, be upon us; let the work of our hands prosper, O prosper the work of our hands!

If we use our feet to take us to kind of places where we can grow spiritually, then we can pray that God will indeed come to our houses and bless us.

And if we use our mouth, our hands, and our feet properly, maybe just maybe we CAN make this world a little bit better, and help ensure that the new year will be a wonderful one for us, our families, and the Jewish people.

Shana tova!