

A Life of Meaning and Purpose
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Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley

Good *yuntif*!

Just out of curiosity, how many of you currently have, or have ever had, a resume or a CV?

If you are like most people, you wrote your first resume when you were in high school. You needed it to land that summer job at the mall or a part time job scooping ice cream. Nowadays, high school students also write resumes for college, for internships and gap year programs. Throughout our careers, we spend a lot of time updating and perfecting our resumes. Today, there is virtually no job you can apply for without a resume or a CV.

Now, I am also curious (This time, without a show of hands) if any of you have written a eulogy – not a eulogy of someone else – but *your* own eulogy – you know, one that will be read at your funeral?

Does the question make you feel uncomfortable? Yeah, me too. But it's important, because the point I am trying to make is this:

We spend a lot of our lives focusing on our *resume* virtues, and not so much time working on our *eulogy* virtues.

Today, I'd like to invite you to reflect on what is most important to you. I'd like you to consider the idea that your resume, as impressive as it may be, is a list of things you have done. Your eulogy – may it be a long time before it's needed – will be much, much more. It will be a deep expression of who you are as a human being.

In his recent book, [The Road to Character](#), David Brooks challenges us to focus on the deeper values that inform our lives. He observes that our society promotes and values a culture of the Big Me, "which emphasizes external success... achieving wealth, fame and status," over qualities at the "core of our being like kindness, bravery, honesty or faithfulness."

I was curious about resume virtues and how they compare with eulogy virtues, so I did a bit of research. I started with an internet search for "keywords that make a great resume." Not surprisingly, they are all achievements:

- Undertakes complex assignments
- Meets deadlines
- Delivers performance
- Applies strong financial planning

- Reduces expenditures
- Operates with urgency
- Thrives in fast-paced setting
- Generates revenue.

I am sure there are many more such attributes, but I was impressed with these qualities that might make someone a fine employee.

At the same time, as I pondered the list, I realized one might find those same qualities in a robot, or a computer.

It made me wonder about other human traits like kindness, generosity, compromise and integrity. Surely these are important too.

So I did a search for the most commonly expressed attributes found in eulogies – both those I have written and some I found online. Here are some of the words I discovered:

- Love
- Joy
- Zest for life
- Fulfillment
- Hope
- Helps others
- Passionate
- Open-hearted
- Generous
- Has a sense of humor
- Inspiring
- Thoughtful
- Kind

These are qualities that feel more human to me. These are the attributes I would want my children and grandchildren to remember about me.

Don't get me wrong, resume virtues are important. What we do – what we accomplish with our lives – really does matter. However, I fear that the culture of our society today encourages the resume to drown out the cultivation of character. I was shocked to learn, for example, that the majority of people – 53% in fact, lie on their resume. Strange, because I don't think most people think of themselves as liars,

nor would they hold lying up as an example of their character. So it seems that ambition sometimes trumps one's moral compass.

To some degree, this is human nature. In his book, The Lonely Man of Faith, Joseph Soloveitchik describes a contradiction in human beings suggested by the story of Genesis. As you know, the first two chapters offer two different accounts of creation. Genesis gives us two Adams – two men, two representatives of humanity – and they are not the same. The first Adam is created in the image of God. The second is formed from dust and is literally divinely inspired with the breath of life. Adam I is commanded to fill the world and subdue it. Adam II is charged with tending the garden and protecting it.

Soloveitchik teaches that to be created in God's image is to be endowed with a striving to become a creator, like God. Adam I is blessed with ambition and drive for creative and constructive activity. In giving him the mandate to subdue nature, God directs Adam I to build, plant, reap, sow and achieve greatness. "Adam the first is aggressive, bold and victory minded. His motto is success – triumph over the cosmic forces."

In contrast, Adam II responds to the call of the cosmos not by power or control, but by asking, "Why?" "Why did the world come into existence? What is the purpose of all this?" Adam II "encounters the world in all its colorfulness, splendor, and grandeur, and studies it with awe and admiration." He looks for the divine image outside of himself – "in every beam of light, in every bud or blossom, in the morning breeze and stillness of a starlit evening."

The point is, we are both Adams. As Adam I, we are creative forces that love doing stuff. We keep ourselves occupied with the ongoing work of creation. We apply our skills, talents and nearly limitless energy to accomplishing our goals – often to the greater good of all humanity and the world in which we live.

But we are not machines. Our lives are not the sum total of what we have accomplished, nor the wealth we have amassed. The danger is that the resume virtues of Adam I can transform ambition into competition and competition to a deep need to win at all costs, even if winning comes at the expense of others.

However, in those rare moments of quietude, when we stop for a bit to pause and reflect, we remember that we are also Adam II. We are endowed with a deep desire to find meaning in our lives and in the world around us. We won't settle for a job well-done. We want to live with a sense of purpose – knowing that what we do really matters, not just for us right now, but for the unforeseeable future.

So we are both. The problem is, from a very early age, our society encourages us and rewards us for the resume virtues, and not as much for the eulogy virtues.

Even the beloved Dr. Seuss, a great advocate for children and childhood development, couldn't help himself. His book, Oh, The Places You'll Go! Is the 5th best

seller in the history of the New York Times list – a favorite gift for preschoolers and college grads alike. Listen to how it beats the drum of individual success:

“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You’re on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the guy who’ll decide where to go.”

“You’ll be on your way up! You’ll be seeing great sights! You’ll join the high fliers who soar to high heights.

You won’t lag behind, because you’ll have the speed. You’ll pass the whole gang and you’ll soon take the lead. Wherever you fly, you’ll be the best of the best. Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.”

“And will you succeed? Yes! You will, indeed! (98 and $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed.)”

For Seuss, in this book at least, life is about fulfilling your own desires. All challenges are external. The goals are Adam I goals – independence, fame and success. Work is the defining feature of life. Oh, and the word “you” – occurs 90 times! It’s all about you.

All this would be well and good. But what about character? Where can we go for encouragement and celebration of the virtues of selflessness, generosity, integrity, honesty, kindness and compassion?

Well, first of all, look around you. You’re here! You’re here because this is what religion, what Jewish religion is all about. And you’re here on Yom Kippur because that is what Yom Kippur is all about. It is about looking deep within ourselves and asking – How can I be a better person? What can I do to lead a more fulfilling, more meaningful, life?

Judaism has a lot to say about this. You’ll find hints and answers all through the *machzor*. You’ll learn about it with others in the study of *Middot* – cultivating qualities of character. Hey, you’ll even be reminded of it when you pull out your keys!

In his book, David Brooks offers a 15 point “Humility Code” that can guide us and help us restore a sense of balance in our lives. He calls it The Humility Code because he believes we need to get Adam I out of the way in order to hear Adam II. Let me share with you just a few of his points:

1. Remember that we do not live for happiness, but for holiness. Life is not only about pleasure or success. It is about meaning, purpose and moral virtue.
2. Recognize that we are flawed. We will always fall short. And we know less than we think we know. This is to remind us that we are not the center of the universe.

3. Even though we are flawed, we are splendidly endowed. We have the capacity to see what is right, and to do wondrous things.
4. Humility is a critical virtue. It reminds us that we serve a higher order.
5. We cannot achieve self-mastery on our own. We need families, friends, ancestors, the rule of law, community – and God – as mentors and guides to reach our highest and best selves.
6. To regain balance, we need to quiet the self. We've got to tone down the ego and allow other voices to help us see the world more clearly. You can find quietude in your life through prayer, meditation and observing Shabbat – the greatest gift Judaism has given civilization.

Remember what Martin Buber teaches in The Way of Man? Every person that ever existed, or ever will exist is created unique for a purpose. For if there had ever been anyone just like you, there would be no reason for you to be. Every living soul has a divine purpose to fulfill on this earth. Our task in life, very simply, is to figure out why God put us here, and do our best to fulfill that purpose.

Only by paying attention and developing your eulogy virtues will you ever have a clue about why you are here. There is only one thing I know for sure: we are not here for our own sake. We are here to make the holy manifest in the world with our moral virtues and our righteous deeds.

I began today by asking you about your resume, and I wondered aloud if you ever think about your eulogy. Now, I am not suggesting that you sit down and write a eulogy. Actually, that would be entirely unnecessary. The truth is, each of us writes our own eulogy every single day by how we act – the moral decisions we make, the way we manage our relationships with others – and by the way we live our lives.

May the eulogy you live and inscribe for yourself in the year ahead testify to your highest quality of character, and reflect a deep sense of meaning and purpose. May you and your loved ones be sealed for a year of health and happiness, serenity and peace.