

The “How to be a Mensch” check list  
Yom Kippur sermon for our family service

David had been waiting for this very moment all year. Since he left camp last summer, he has been counting down the days until he could stand in front of that target again, bow and arrow in hand, focusing on the center, focusing on the bull’s eye....this would be his year to send that arrow right down the middle. He could even see it in his mind....and here he was at last....David stood tall, hands steady, arrow set, he pulls the arrow back with a controlled strength, breathes in ever so slightly, lets go, and in the blink of an eye!.....completely misses the target...he missed....he imagined it all year and he missed....he wanted it so badly...but he missed....he missed the mark.....and this is very much why we are actually all here today.

Earlier, when we repeated the sins we committed over the year, we said together, Al Chet she’chatanu....the sins we have committed....but a better translation of the Hebrew is not the word sin but rather for the missed marks we committed over the year.....but what is this mark we are trying to hit? For David it was the bull’s eye of the actual target he saw in front of him. But for us, what is at our center? What are we striving to do? Who are we striving to become? The answer can be summed up in a word. Mensch! And being a mensch means being a good, kind, and caring person influenced by strong Jewish morals and values. It is what our Jewish tradition says is the ultimate mark, the ultimate bull’s eye.

But is it random? Is it luck? Who is a mensch and who is not? No. It is a choice we make and there are actually instructions on just how to do it. Now, I know many of us here want nothing to do with *instructions*. When I was a kid and I would get a new model plane to build, I would completely ignore the instructions. I just wanted to build. And without fail, I always ended up with extra pieces that were important, and it was too late to go back because the glue was already dry. But we are not building model planes....we building model human beings. So any instruction we can get, I’ll take.

And these instructions, The “How to be an Mensch check list” is actually part of the prayers we say every week on Shabbat. They begin, Elyu dvarim she’einlahem shiur.....this are the things that are beyond measure.

Honor your family

Perform acts of kindness and compassion

Learn and grow with others

Welcome the guest and the stranger

Visit the sick

Celebrate with friends and family

Engage in prayer

Make peace

And the most important, study torah, because torah leads to them all

Honor your family. How often do we take the time to be together as a family?...and I don’t mean just being in the same room or sitting at the same table, tv on, our heads

buried in an ipad or iphone. Go for a walk, have a meal, talk about your day, pass the veggies, laugh, tell stories, share memories. You can even do it every week, Friday night Shabbat dinner.....Mentsch? CHECK!

Acts of kindness and compassion. This helps us to live for more than ourselves. Don't be selfish. Notice the people around you and engage them. Be a part of the world in which you live. Volunteer at the food pantry, read a book to school children, share a sandwich, give tzedakah, stick up for someone being bullied, notice when a friend is in need and be available..... Mentsch? CHECK!

Learn and grow with others.....it does not matter where you go to school, where you work, or if your work is your family. How you challenge yourself and who you surround yourself with, is what matters. Put your best into your homework or your presentations. Be thorough with your assignments. Ask questions when you do not understand. Read. Engage....Mentsch? CHECK!

Welcome the guest and the stranger....all of us at some point in our lives have been the new kid... wishing with all of our heart that somebody, anybody would sit with us, or invite us to sit with them, say hello, smile, anything....how many of us actually had our wish come true? When you see that same person wishing, wanting, waiting the same way we did. Invite them. Sit with them. Say hello. Smile....Mentsch? CHECK!

Visit the sick...sure you can send an email or texts but visiting a person face to face, but there is nothing like the presence of another human being, seeing a smile, hearing a laugh. The warmth from a hand on your forehead from family or a friend..... Mentsch? CHECK!

Celebrate with family and friends. When you are invited to a birthday party, a bat mitzvah, a wedding....go! Raise your friends up on chairs. Circle and surround them with love, joy and dancing. There is enough pain, suffering, problems in the world so when an opportunity arises to slow down and focus on the beauty of a momentous milestone in lives of our family and friends, take it!..... Mentsch? CHECK!

Engage in prayer...or in other words, saying please and thank you. We say thank you to God in the morning for restoring our souls and say please at night to keep us safe under the shelter of God's wings. We can say the motzi, the prayer for bread before we eat to say thank you for how amazing it is to have food on the table, to appreciate just how much goes into the creation of just one piece of bread, how it starts as wheat in the field and makes it's winding way to challah French toast on my plate..... Mentsch? CHECK!

Making peace. Every summer at camp, kids learn how to live with at least 8 others....some like them....and some not like them at all. When you create what is essentially a new family for the summer, spending nearly every moment together things happen and they learn how deal with real life...saying I'm sorry....admitting mistakes

....crying ...laughing... talking.... listening ....and this does not have to be just at camp....this can really be anywhere....home, school, work..... Mensch? CHECK!

And the study of torah is above them all because it leads to them all....but this doesn't mean just sitting in a room with a book or sitting behind a desk in a classroom. This is the hard part. This is the work. I never said being a mensch was easy. It means making a commitment to be part of a community that fosters and embraces learning. That fosters and embraces a way of life and a way to look at the world. We are that community. Everything we need, all the tools are right here it is just a matter of us taking advantage of them....Making a commitment to show up. I understand that we all have to make choices on how to fill the little time we have. There will always be reasons not to, soccer, too much homework, work late, too tired...But our programs, our schools, our youth group, our camps, our temple are only transformative, will only help us to become menschs if we show up, because outside of the home, these are the real places that teach us to be the people we want to be. When speaking about our camps, a counselor recently said to me, we do not come to camp to learn how to do something, we come to camp to learn how to be someone....and the same is true for everything that is our congregation.

So in this new year, may we all be committed to the Mensch check list:

Honor family

acts of kindness

Learn and grow

Welcome the stranger

Visit the sick

Celebrate with friends and family

pray

Make peace

And the most important, show up because **that** is what leads to them all. Shana tova.