

**The Place Where We're Perfect**  
*Erev Roshanah 5772 – Rabbi Toba Spitzer*

As many of you know, over this past year we had a special Torah of Chesed campaign focused on the inclusion of children with special needs and their families in the life of our community. There is still much work to be done in this arena, but we had a good year in which we did some important learning together, and began to make some changes in how we do things in the congregation.

Last spring, with this campaign on my mind, I came across a beautiful piece written by Beverly Beckham, a columnist for the Boston Globe. I filed it away, and then found it again as I was beginning to think about what to speak about these High Holydays. I'd like to share the column with you this evening.

***Right Planet, Right Child***

Sometimes I think it's as simple as this: my granddaughter Lucy was born on the wrong planet. There was a mix-up in paradise and she got on the wrong shuttle and ended up here on earth instead of in some galaxy a trillion miles away where everyone is like her.

Because in the world she was meant for, Lucy is perfect. Perfect size. Perfect student. Perfect child. She lands in the middle of every performance chart that doctors and schools so revere. She reaches all her milestones exactly when her peers do. She smiles and rolls over and crawls and talks and walks right on schedule.

In the world she was meant for she climbs as high as everyone else on the jungle gym, runs as fast, plays as hard. In class she knows as much as the boy in front of her and is a little bit better at sequencing than the girl beside her.

At lunch, she talks to the kids across the table and they talk back. She gets invited to play dates, has lots of friends, sings and dances and plays along with everyone else. And every afternoon when she comes home from school, her mother holds up her art work and spelling and arithmetic papers and smiles.

In the world she was meant for, even strangers look at Lucy and think, "I wish I had a little girl just like her," because she epitomizes childhood.

But by some geographical glitch, she landed on earth instead, in the hinterlands of evolution, where innocence is meant to be grown out of and where the tongue does all the talking, not the heart.

On the afternoons I pick up Lucy from first grade, I watch the children racing across the school yard, yelling and whooping and smiling, so many children, all the same. And then comes Lucy, holding her aide's hand, taking it slow, beaming when she sees me.

And I think, if we were the only family on earth, we wouldn't know that Lucy should be adding and subtracting and reading chapter books and running across a school yard eager to go home and play Wii. We wouldn't equate Down syndrome with limitations. We would instead think, isn't she amazing? Look at how she loves us. Look at how happy she is.

Lucy needs extra help with things. She depends on extra help because it takes her longer to learn what typical kids pick up easily. How to clap in rhythm. How to pump on a swing. How to say a whole sentence. How to add and subtract. How to write her name. But she tries and tries and tries and tries. And when she gets it right, she is all joy.

Here on earth, we all depend on wheels. We don't have wings — we can't fly. This is our disability.

We accommodate this disability by using bicycles, cars, trains, and planes and, yes, these are clumsy, cumbersome things and, yes, we'd get places a lot faster if we could just spread our wings and fly.

But we don't beat ourselves up over this. We don't think of ourselves as imperfect because we can't take flight.

But we would if everyone else could fly.

Lucy cries when someone else cries. A child she doesn't know starts bawling on the playground and Lucy's lips quiver and the next thing you know she is crying, too. But soundlessly. This is Lucy's heart talking.

Was she sent here by mistake? Is she on the wrong planet? Or did she one day gaze out at the universe and see us here, on this flawed, messed up earth, and think: That's where I want to be. That's where I choose to be, with that family. With this mother and that father. In that little room with the tilted ceiling. Because that's where I am wanted. Because that's where I'll be loved.

("Right Planet, Right Child," Boston Sunday Globe, April 10, 2011  
[www.boston.com/yourtown/westwood/articles/2011/04/10/right\\_planet\\_right\\_child/](http://www.boston.com/yourtown/westwood/articles/2011/04/10/right_planet_right_child/))

I love this image that Beckham conjures of a world in which her sweet granddaughter is "perfect"—where who she is is expected, and accepted. After I read it, I began to wonder, is there a world where each of us, like little Lucy, is perfect? Where we can accept who we are, and how we are, without feeling like there are so many ways in which we don't measure up? Where others would accept us as well?

As I re-read this article in recent weeks, I began thinking about the lessons of this article in the context of this time of year.

It's a funny task that we have during these Days of Awe, also known as the *Aseret Yamei Teshuvah*, the 10 Days of *Teshuvah*, of "return" or "repentance." On the one hand, we are challenged to realize all the ways in which we are imperfect, the areas in which we have some work to do. On Yom Kippur we'll read through multiple litanies of *chataim*, alphabetical listings of all the ways that it's possible for people to go wrong, from unkind speech to disrespecting others to dishonoring our own bodies. We'll sit with the reality of our own shortcomings and mistakes, and we'll beat our chests in the hope that our hearts can open, that we can accept the need to make some change in our lives, to try a little harder in the year to come.

Yet at the same time, our tradition tells us that on Yom Kippur we become like the angels, wearing white and refraining from food, just like the heavenly beings of our ancestors' imagination. In this image, we're not lacking at all. We are Godly creatures who just need to be reminded of our higher natures.

So which is it – are we flawed and fallible human beings, or heavenly creatures made in the image of God?

Maybe the answer is, a bit of both. We are human, and we are flawed. Our actions are flawed. Our speech is flawed. Sometimes our intentions are flawed. And we make mistakes – sometimes small, easily correctable mistakes; and sometimes whopping, harmful, very negative mistakes.

But as our liturgy reminds us every morning: our *neshama*, our soul, that which is at the very center of our being human – *tehora hi*. It's pure. It can't be sullied. It can't make a mistake. It's what's always there to return to. For all the ways in which we may stray as a matter of thought or action, there remains something essential in each of us that is indeed perfect. How deep that something is buried, how inaccessible it might become – we know that there are damaged human beings out there in whom that holy spark is very dim indeed. But thankfully, for most of us, our *neshamah* is not so entirely covered in shmutz that we don't know it's there.

The balance that we're asked to achieve over these holidays is to take responsibility for our mistakes, while at the same time embracing the Godliness at our core. But it's so easy to get confused, to identify with our mistakes, to begin to believe that maybe there really is something fundamentally flawed in who we are. And sometimes as we move through this world, we begin to believe the same about the people around us.

Beverly Beckham makes an interesting point in her article, when she comments that we don't tend to beat ourselves up over things that we know we can't do – like fly. Yet so many of us spend so much time berating ourselves for failing some imagined standard – or judging harshly the people around us for failing that same imagined standard. For each of us, these standards are different – based on some combination of messages we've received from parents and teachers, from bosses and children, from the larger culture. We each pick our own point of failure, that area in which we assume that everyone else can fly, and only we – or only we and the other losers like us – cannot.

We're not smart enough, or beautiful enough, or likeable enough, or successful enough. Like Goldilocks' porridge, we're too hot or too cold, too much or not enough, too this or barely that. But never ever "just right."

And if we're not subjecting ourselves to this constant judgment, then it's very likely that we're projecting it outwards, and rating everyone around us on some highly subjective scale of "okay – not okay."

What would it be like to imagine a world in which I, in which you, are just fine? Maybe not perfect, but perfectly in line with what is expected for a human being? Not a world in which everything we do is fine – because we all make mistakes, and need to learn from and correct those mistakes. But a world in which our essential nature is perfectly acceptable? A world in which we know that our essential nature is just fine, where we have nothing to apologize for?

I also wonder what it would be like to walk through the world and see other people in this way. What would it be like to walk down the street, or sit in our office or classroom, or at the table with our family, and think, "You are perfect in your world. And you are perfect in yours. In some place, in some galaxy, each and every one of you is perfect." What would that be like? How might we treat one another?

Maybe we'd become curious:

What's it like on your world, where people do things so differently than what I expect a person to do? What are you able to do that I can barely imagine myself being able to do – some skill or attribute that is just par for the course on your world? What can I learn from your world, and what can you learn from mine?

In this scenario, every human interaction would become a kind of intergalactic exploratory mission. It would be fascinating. And maybe some of those standards, the measurements and assumptions that we tend to treat as absolute, would begin to fade away. Because what's "normal" on my planet might be a little "off" on yours, and vice versa. And at the same time, I might discover peculiarities of your planet that would be useful to import to mine. Maybe you'd have something to teach me about kindness, about creativity, about humor. Maybe I'd have something to teach you about wisdom, about excitement, about order or messiness or being playful or being serious. If we didn't all expect everyone to be more or less the same, then how much more open would we be to all the ways that we're different?

For the next ten days, we are given a bit of time for ourselves, to begin to experiment. I offer you Beckham's words, her insights, in that spirit of experimentation.

Maybe your work these High Holydays is to embrace the little Lucy within yourself. To see how you are perfect, and how much you have to give to the poor shlubs on this planet among whom you've landed. Or maybe your challenge is to bring a little more

interplanetary curiosity to the people around you, to judge a little less, and learn a little more.

As we enter into this new year, 5772, may we remember to treat ourselves, and everyone around us, with compassion and kindness. May we honor the gifts that each of us brings to this beautiful world we've inherited. *L'shanah tovah!*