



Rosh Hashanah 2010

“TAKING RESPONSIBILITY”

With Great Power
by Sam Maser

Every once in a while, my now nine-year-old daughter Maude asks me which I think is better, “being a kid or being a grown up?” The first time she asked me this, maybe five years ago, I decided to try an object lesson. I told her that on that Saturday, when we woke up, she could be the grown up all day, and I would be the kid. Of course she was thrilled with this idea.

Saturday came, we got up, she reminded me that she got to be the “boss” all day. “Yep,” I said, “you can make all the decisions. So, what are we going to do first?” Naturally she said, “Watch television.” So we did. And when the show ended, Maude said, “Now it’s time for breakfast.”

“Great, what are we having?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, you’re the grown up, you decide.”

“Cereal?”

“Fine.” And I continued sitting on the couch.

“Mama, aren’t you gonna get the cereal?”

“Nope,” I said. “I’m the kid. You’re the grown up. You’ve got to do all the grown up stuff today. You’ve got to make breakfast, and do the dishes after. And if we go out, you need to pay for whatever we buy or do. Do you have enough money in your piggy bank?”

She looked at me and burst into tears, absolutely furious. She’d been duped – not especially kind of me, I know. I held her and comforted her, made her breakfast and did the dishes, got her dressed and we went on with our day – and she didn’t have to pay for a thing. She didn’t ask me about which was better – a kid’s life or a grown up’s life – for a while after that.

From a mostly powerless kid’s point of view, being a powerful, in-charge grown up seems like the greatest thing in the world: You can do whatever you want whenever you want, with no one “bossing” you. But kids can’t see the other side of this equation. Which is that grown ups, at least most grown ups, don’t get to do whatever we want whenever we want. In fact, “powerful” as we are, we rarely get to do whatever we want. In the first Spider-Man movie, this was summed up with the – for me, anyway – unforgettable line: “With great power comes great responsibility.”

Responsibility. It's a bear, isn't it? As kids, teenagers, we yearn to be grown up, to take control of our lives, to have the power. And then we do. And it's just not as much fun as it looked. First the weight of choosing a life path: a career, a partner or not, where to settle, whether or not to have kids. And then meeting (ideally exceeding) the requirements of your job to earn an income and support yourself (and maybe others), and, if you're in one, maintaining your marriage or relationship – not to mention “keeping the romance alive,” ha! – while dealing with the regular chores of existence: marketing and cleaning and laundry and shopping and paying bills. And paying bills. And paying bills. And if you do decide to have kids – even just one! – the responsibilities multiply exponentially. And that doesn't begin to cover commitments to aging parents, to extended family and to friends and to whatever communities you're a part of: your workplace, your building or neighborhood association, your various memberships and affiliations, and let's not forget your congregation! And what about bigger responsibilities? To your city, country, planet? Are you being greenly responsible even if you can't bear to change your warm sunlight GE bulbs for the horrible low-emission fluorescent ones? Responsibility. It's absolutely exhausting.

So why do it then? Why take on all this responsibility? “Sure, Teacher, I can bake four dozen cupcakes tonight for tomorrow's class party.” “Of course, Neighbor, I'd be happy to look after your aggressively vicious Siamese cat for twelve days.” “Yes, Rabbi, I have hours of free time in which to write a talk on responsibility for the Rosh Hashanah service.”

And with all that's on our plates, how do we prioritize? Some things have to be let go, and everyone's choices are different. For me, the tendency has been that everyone else comes first – my family's needs (both basic and emotional), the too-many volunteer commitments I've made – while the cleanliness of my house and my own needs come last. I'm not advocating this route: There are dustbunnies in my house big enough to be considered pets, and as is perfectly evident from looking at me, my body – and thus my health – could use some more attention. Further, by making raising Maude my priority, I gave up my career. At the time it seemed wise, but now, in this economy, trying to break back into the world of work, well, maybe not. To make myself more employable, I've recently entered grad school to become a reading specialist, but adding classes and study time into the already overloaded mix has been challenging to say the least. So what will give? Well, I'm learning to say “no” more – Rabbi, don't ask me to do **this** again! – and Maude's going to go to an afterschool program the two days a week I have classes, and Jack has to finally learn to put something resembling dinner on the table those two nights, and I guess the dustbunnies will soon be large enough that maybe we can pick up some extra cash giving neighborhood kids pony rides on 'em. Or maybe I can ride them, because I don't think there's going to be time for any other exercise any time soon.

Of course, even though it may sometimes feel that way, responsibility isn't only juggling the chores and obligations of our lives. Being responsible, especially for something bigger than the petty concerns of everyday life, can give you a great feeling of satisfaction, can help you learn who you are, can even bring you joy. This kind of larger responsibility is connected to morality, to “doing the right thing.”

And then there's the responsibility of owning your actions, your behavior. This past spring, when President Obama took the time to give a commencement address to the graduating class of Kalamazoo Central High School, he articulated something that I believe very strongly. He said, “Don't make excuses. Take responsibility not just for your successes; take responsibility where you fall short as well.” Jack and I are working hard to teach Maude this. Did you master

a difficult piece on your harp? Great. Own it and share your feeling of success with someone who loves you. Did you shirk practice, forget your homework, maybe didn't do what you promised someone you would – like clean the litter box? Own that too. Learning to admit when you're wrong – not making excuses – is a responsibility a lot of adults don't seem able to handle.

A pivotal revelation of my adult life that happened fifteen or so years ago, when my mother was visiting me in New York. We were walking down Broadway when a homeless guy asked me for money and I gave him some change. My mother was appalled. Not that I'd helped him, but that he'd had the chutzpah to approach us, in his dirty, smelly, down-on-his-luck state. "But Mom," I said, "that could be you or me needing help." "Absolutely NOT," said my mother, "That could NEVER be me." And then it hit me: Unlike my born-with-a-silver-spoon-in-her-mouth (Tiffany's, engraved) mother, I've never felt that way, even though I too was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Credit my father, whose family lost everything in the Great Depression, or credit my eleven years of Quaker there-is-a-light-in-everyone, socially-conscious education. Whatever the reason, I've always felt it could be me, it could be any one of us.

And that's why I chose to become a Humanistic Jew. Because Humanistic Jews realize this: That we have a responsibility to – be responsible – ethically, morally, socially responsible. We don't need edicts from a supernatural authority to tell us to step up, to do the right thing. All we need to do is recognize that tomorrow any one of us could be laid off, evicted or foreclosed upon, go hungry, have our rights trampled on, ignored or abused.

That said, I have to own the fact that I have yet to take on any large social responsibility. Yes, over the years I've donated money to causes I believe in, and I've taken part in plenty of "easy" fixes, like buying a couple of cans of food when people are sitting at a table outside our local market collecting for our community's food pantry. And yes, Jack and I have taken Maude down to Washington to protest the war in Iraq and to peace vigils. This is all good work, and satisfying in its way, but I have the sense I could be doing more, if only I didn't have to do it alone.

Over the years of the City Congregation's existence, many smart, dedicated people have led the charge for social action, and the congregation has done much good work, ranging from walking and raising money to fight various diseases, to collecting new school supplies for underprivileged children and used coats for the homeless. But we have to own our congregational behavior, not make excuses, and admit that as a congregation we can do more. What we commit ourselves to taking responsibility for – homelessness, hunger issues, marriage equality, immigration rights – doesn't matter. It just matters that we do it. And it matters that the congregation's kids, the next generation of Humanistic Jewish leaders, be not only aware of what we take on, but in some way be involved in it.

But how on earth do we motivate ourselves and make room for one more thing, especially something that feels so big? Everyone is incredibly busy. Often conversations with friends feel like busy-ness competitions: "Well, I've got a huge report due at work the same day as my kid's class presentation, and then I've gotta quick turnaround trip to London." "Oh, me too! I promised my client I'd be available all week, but now my mother's going into the hospital, and my assistant just gave me notice." To paraphrase the opening of Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, "All happy families resemble one another, but each busy family is busy in its own way." We've all heard Rabbi Tarfon's words: "It is not your obligation to complete the

task, but nor are you free to desist from it.” So how do we do this amidst all the other responsibilities in our lives?

Here’s one answer: Let’s do it together. One of the beauties of being part of a Humanistic Jewish congregation is that we can work **as a group** to effect real systemic change. It’s efficient! Busy people love efficiency! Suddenly, the social action project that we don’t have the energy or financial resources to take on individually becomes possible. It’s a team effort. Those who can pitch in a little time do and those that can pitch in a little money do – and those that can do both do! – and suddenly we’ve become a force for social justice, a strong group caring for those who – often for reasons out of their control – are unable to care for themselves.

When we come together for Rosh Hashanah next year, the tenth anniversary of 9/11 will have just occurred. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we, as a congregation, could point to something socially relevant that we’d accomplished in the past year, something solid that worked to counterbalance unthinkably destructive events like 9/11? We know we can’t change the whole world, but we can make a difference. In this new Jewish year, 5771, let us each step up, do the right thing – eke out from our busy, busy, busy lives whatever time we can – to work together as a congregation toward a meaningful contribution of Tikkun Olam, healing the world. In taking on this sort of responsibility, our community will be deeply enriched, and we will each individually be the stronger for it. With great power comes great responsibility...