

Erev Rosh HaShanah / 5770
Rabbi Benjamin David

This summer my daughter and I spent a lot of time looking at cows. Yes, cows.

We did this as for the first time we spent a week in upstate New York. I was a faculty member at the Reform movement's leadership academy, Kutz Camp. Whenever I was finished teaching for the day we would take a long walk down the road, passing one farm after another. And even though we saw a good number of goats and chickens, Noa just loved the cows.

She would "moo" at them and they would "moo" at her, then she would "moo" at me and I would have to "moo" back to her which made the cows "moo" at me.

There were so many different types of cows. She was mesmerized by the various shapes and colors. I would even venture to say she celebrated their diversity, in her own, two-year-old way. Some of the cows would spend all day in the grass while others would be up and about, checking on the others, asking them for the time and who knows what else.

I have to admit that I too was fascinated. But of course I am not the first rabbi to be fascinated by cows.

As it turns out rabbis have been interested in cows ever since the Torah made clear that somewhere out there, somewhere, is the one perfect cow. The Book of Numbers mentions a *parah adumah*, a red heifer with no blemishes, all of its hair the same color, an animal that is in perfect health, having never been used for work, never touched.

If found, the cow would be used to bring ritual purity to the community, publicly slaughtered, that is, as an ultimate sacrifice to God.

The Talmud contends that the only person to ever encounter a true *parah adumah* was, take a guess, Moses.

Generally the Sages agree, however, that such an animal is a biological impossibility, that the existence of a quote-unquote flawless being is just not possible. I tend to think they're right, not because I have seen one or two cows in my day and I'm such an expert now, but because I have come to believe that the very idea of perfection is either totally subjective or a misnomer altogether. I also believe that this is an important message at this time of the year, our high holy day season when, in the most honest of ways, we examine who we are, where we have been, and where we are going.

Because sometimes we can be so hard on ourselves. We can expect so much, too much. And we can be so hard on those we love and expect so much of them, too much.

We can become so frustrated, our hands clenched in frustration when the plan did not go exactly right, major plans, life plans, or much smaller plans, daily plans. When the date, the interview, the meeting, the opportunity, didn't go just right. When our kids' grades aren't perfect. When they're not perfect basketball or soccer players.

When the image of the future you that you had in your head when you were twenty or thirty or forty, when all was possible and yours, does not totally match who you have since become.

What is perfection? And what is our obsession with perfection? Is happiness hidden in perfect skin? Is total contentment waiting on the other side of a Harvard education?

I can remember sitting up late one night in Israel watching pitching legend David Cone on a fuzzy TV screen. My roommates were fast asleep. Cone was in the process of throwing a perfect game. You know, a game during which the pitcher records nine scoreless innings, twenty seven consecutive outs, no hits, no walks, no errors. It is in fact the rarest of baseball occurrences. Since 1900 a total of sixteen Major League pitchers have thrown a perfect game. It is just about impossible to achieve.

I think back to that night now and realize that really the idea of a perfect game is something of a myth. Judging by my sleeping roommates this one was far from perfection.

Actually, to a great extent a perfect game is defined by the fact that nothing happened. Where exactly was the precious ark of trying and failing and trying again? Where was the magic of mistakes and improvements, all of that vulnerability that comes with being oh so very human?

My perfect game would be defined more by who I went with, maybe I'd be there with my dad, or with Noa, maybe there would be a two out double in the top of the ninth, maybe we'd have really great seats, just on the third base side.

I'm guessing your perfect game or your idea of a perfect day is totally different. And I'm guessing that, in general, your sense of the ideal, when it comes to everything from baseball teams to Jewish practice to colleges for your kids to fashion to politics, is not the same as your neighbors.

I'm also guessing that sometimes it's hard to remain committed to this idea, this idea that the ideal, the perfect, not only can be personal, but should be, must be, highly personal.

Maybe that means striving for your own goals and helping your children to strive for their own goals, large and small. Regardless of what others are doing.

Early on in that year in Israel I learned about a Hebrew word, an interesting Hebrew word, the word *shalem*. It sounds like shalom, peace, and in fact it is derived from the same root. *Shalem* is used in the same context in Hebrew as we use the term perfect in English. But *shalem* doesn't mean perfect. *Shalem* as it turns out means whole.

And it speaks not to the often fleeting excitement that comes with scholastic or professional achievement, but to something bigger, something eternal, something that cannot be captured in a resume, or reflected by a test score or title, something much greater, and that is the fact that you, you, were created in God's image. Uniquely holy. Uniquely whole.

God, who, I would venture to say, celebrates our diversity and, according to our tradition, prompts us to do the same. God, who made us all different and, according to our tradition, wants us to appreciate and embrace this fact. God, who believes in you, you, your way, your goodness, your ability to inspire, our ability, all of our ability, with our very limited time, to reach for our greatest selves.

Maybe we can be inspired by the story of Zusya, the sage who knew he would one day stand before the Heavenly Gates. Zusya realized he would not be asked if he had lived the life of the great rabbis before him. He would not be asked if he had been as learned or as generous as the mighty pillars of our people, but rather had he lived his best life, had he become the best possible Zusya.

He devoted himself, while he still could, to being able to answer, in the simplest terms, without hesitation, YES. My life was a yes.

Or maybe we can be inspired by Moses himself. Moses, who took what God gave him, a speech impediment, abounding humility, all of the shyness and hesitation, a touch of hope. He took all of it, *his wholeness*, and he stared his destiny in the face

and said I am going to make the most of this. I am going to be everything that *I can be*.

When we reach the end and we find ourselves on the mountain top, just like Moses did at the end of his time, when the work is done and the reigns have been passed, we'll look out and then we'll look back. We'll breathe deep, content, and we'll each say: I was the best me I could have been. I was the best me. And my life was a YES.

L'shanah tovah. Here is to a good sweet year. Amen.