

When the Boxt family first moved to Knoxville back in 2017, we were excited to learn that if we purchased season tickets to the theater in Nashville, we would be guaranteed tickets to “Hamilton” when it was in Nashville. So, for almost 2 years, Carlie and I (and sometimes Batya) would jump in the car every couple of months and drive two and a half hours to Nashville to see a musical from their Broadway series, and then drive two and a half hours back to Knoxville after the show. While High Holy Day tickets for Temple Beth Shalom may be the hottest ticket in Ocala today, **everyone** wanted tickets for “Hamilton,” the musical. Back then, “Hamilton” tickets could have cost hundreds or even thousands of dollars.

The musical tells the story of Alexander Hamilton’s life; however, it is the final act of Hamilton’s life that people often remember. With so many amazing successes in his life, it is sad that many focus on his final act – the duel with Aaron Burr. If you remember your history, Aaron Burr was also very successful in his life. And, yet Burr is most

remembered for his final act as well – killing Alexander Hamilton. To quote from Hamilton, Aaron Burr laments in song, “He may have been the first one to die. I survived, but I paid for it. Now I’m the villain in your history.”

While Hamilton the Musical is based on the real lives of Alexander Hamilton and others, the stories we glean from the play are, after all, the point of view of the playwright, Lin-Manuel Miranda, and of the author Ron Chernow, whose biography of Hamilton inspired the musical. What does this mean? Well, we must realize that the stories told in this musical and in the biography are told from the perspective of someone other than those who actually lived these moments. Even auto-biographies are suspect to interpretation. Think about it for a second. How many times have you told a story from your life? And how many times has someone else who was in the story responded, “that’s not how I remember it?”

**The stories we tell in our lives change, depending on where we are in our lives.** While we sometimes might think to ourselves, “I have heard that story before...” (especially when a rabbi is telling a story), the truth is there are details – even the most minute – that change every time we tell a story. And, depending on which audience we are speaking to, those minute details may become major discrepancies. For example, think about the Biblical Stories of Noah and Sodom and Gomorrah. Those stories have very different meanings for us as kids than as adults. The stories have not changed (at least in the Torah), but the way the stories are told have been changed. When we tell our personal stories, the changes and ways we tell the stories are much more personal.

A few days before I left Ocala to drive to Jackson, Mississippi for a conference in June, I was sent a text message with a link to a video: *the Four Agreements*, Lessons 1-10. Now, I do not usually have time to watch or listen to a 50 minute video! However, since I was going to be

in the car for most of the day, it gave me something to do! When I first started listening, I was pretty skeptical. After about 10 minutes in, though, I was hooked. After giving some serious thought to the video over a couple of weeks, I purchased a 3 book set by best-selling author, Don Miguel Ruiz. His teaching is based on ancient Toltec Wisdom. The Toltec were scientists and artists who lived thousands of years ago throughout southern Mexico. Their society was formed to “explore and conserve the spiritual knowledge and practices of the ancient ones.”<sup>1</sup>

The first book of Ruiz’s set is entitled *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*. Through “The Four Agreements,” Ruiz reveals to us “the source of self-limiting beliefs that rob us of joy and create needless suffering.”<sup>2</sup> Beginning with tonight’s sermon, we are going to explore each of “The Four Agreements” and examine how

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<sup>1</sup> *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*, pg. xiii, Don Miguel Ruiz, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, back cover.

these simple but profound truths can genuinely change our lives in so many ways.

Before we start to examine the first of the agreements, let's take a look a bit at the history of the Toltec. These scientists and artists came together as *naguals* (masters) and students at Teotihuacan (Teotewa kan) – an ancient city of pyramids known as the place where “Man Becomes God.”<sup>3</sup> As a result of European conquest and the misuse of power by some of the students, the knowledge of the Toltec was hidden and passed on secretly through different generations of the Toltec *naguals*.

“Toltec knowledge arises from the same essential unity of truth as all the sacred esoteric traditions found around the world. Though it is not a religion, it honors all the spiritual masters who have taught on the earth. While it does embrace spirit, it is most accurately described as a

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, xiii

way of life, distinguished by the ready accessibility of happiness and love.”<sup>4</sup>

In his introduction, Ruiz tells the story “The Smokey Mirror.”

There lived a man, very much like us, who had a dream while he slept in a cave. While dreaming, he imagined waking up and leaving the cave to encounter the millions of stars in the night sky. His own words, “I am made of light; I am made of stars”<sup>5</sup> surprised even himself. He suddenly had a realization – “Everything is God....human perception is merely light perceiving light.”<sup>6</sup> He realized that light encompasses all and that the space in-between is also light, and not empty space.

When he started talking to others about his ideas and his beliefs, no one seemed to understand him. Through their misconceptions of him and his ideals, they deemed him to be an incarnation of God. His response to them was, “It is true. I am God. But you are also God. We

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, xvi

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, xvii

are the same, you and I. We are images of light. We are God.”<sup>7</sup> He believed we were all mirrors of each other; he reflected them and vice versa. Since the others still could not understand nor agree, he said the following, “I am the Smokey Mirror, because I am looking at myself in all of you, but we don’t recognize each other because of the smoke in-between us. That smoke is the *Dream*, and the mirror is you, the dreamer.”<sup>8</sup>

Did you know that our brains dream 24 hours a day? It doesn’t matter whether we are sleeping or awake – some of you are probably “day dreaming” right now, wide awake! And some of you are “night dreaming!” At the end of “The Smokey Mirror,” we find that we are all dreamers and the dreams we see every day, what we are seeing and hearing right now, is only smoke – preventing us from seeing not only our true selves, but also each other in the purest sense.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, xviii

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, xix

Ruiz teaches us that “we are born with the capacity to learn how to dream, and the humans who live before us teach us how to dream the way society dreams.”<sup>9</sup> Through our parents, teachers, religious leaders, political leaders, etc. we are taught all of the things that truly do help to formulate and influence our dreams. Using our *attention*, we are able to focus on what we want to perceive. Take a moment and think about all of the hundreds of stimuli or more that actually might take our attention, if we allowed them to.

As children, we were influenced by the adults in our lives – information was given to us through repetition...and that is how we learned all of our important life lessons. Let us focus on the word *attention*. Perhaps you have never considered how very important that one little word is. As babies and young children, we seek the attention of our parents and other care givers. When we start school, our attention focuses on our teachers and all of the lessons we are to learn.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg.2

In Temple, our attention is on the rabbi or lay leader who is teaching us. Every single one of us seeks the attention of others – and in turn, they seek our attention as well! This continues into adulthood...one might say the need for attention becomes stronger as we get older.

Faith – that is another strong word – and it is 100% related to our attention and the information we learned as children and into adulthood. Information that hooks our attention becomes stored information when we agree with it. As soon as we begin believing in this information – that is called faith! “To have faith is to believe unconditionally.”<sup>10</sup>

Ruiz teaches that when children are taught their beliefs from the adults in their lives, the faith becomes so strong that the belief system actually winds up controlling “our whole dream of life.”<sup>11</sup> This is called *the domestication of humans*. Our children are taught with a system of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pg. 5

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pg. 5

punishment and reward. “You’re a good boy,” or “You’re a good girl.” When we do not follow the rules and do as we are told, we are “a bad girl” or “a bad boy.” Going against the rules causes a punishment; rewards are given when we do good! And what is the primary reward – the attention of people like siblings, teachers, parents and friends. We become addicted to the attention...or the reward. The opposite is also true. What happens if we do not receive the attention? We feel rejected...we feel not good enough. So, we become what others expect of us in order not to feel rejected – to get the attention, the reward.

Take a moment and think back to memories of your childhood when you experienced peer pressure. When we would see others doing things we thought were wrong...did we say no, I will not do that, or did we fear being rejected and then do the act? According to Ruiz, the problem goes much deeper than feeling rejection. Society has taught us the right ways to act, live and think. When we disagree with societal norms, we are all too often afraid to show our disagreements. What

would happen if we accepted ourselves and rejected those societal norms when they do not align with our own thoughts/ideals? If we loved ourselves first, we might not care so much about others thoughts or feelings. This is “self-love.”

The Four Agreements require a very strong will. If we can begin to live our lives according to these agreements, our lives will be transformed in ways we never even could have imagined. What causes us the most drama, the most “hell” in our lives will disappear...and “instead of living in a dream of hell, you will be creating a new dream – your personal dream of heaven”<sup>12</sup> right here on Earth.

The first agreement is the most important of the four...and it is indeed the most difficult one to fulfill. Even if you only are able to keep this first agreement, your whole life will transform to a new level...to “heaven on earth.”<sup>13</sup> ***Be impeccable with your word.*** It sounds so very

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pg. 23

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pg. 25

simple and easy...and it is so, so powerful. The words we use have so much power. With our words, we can create and destroy, and everything in between. Words are a gift from God, perhaps one of the first gifts. To quote from our holy scriptures, Genesis 2:19:

וַיִּצְרֶה יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים מִן־הָאֲדָמָה כָּל־תַּיִת הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֵת כָּל־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיְבִיא אֶל־הָאָדָם לִרְאוֹת מֵה־יִקְרָא־לּוֹ וְכֹל־אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא־לּוֹ הָאָדָם גִּפְשׁ תְּיָהּ הוּא שְׁמוֹ:

*Vayetzter Adonai Elohim min Haadama kol hayat hasadeh v'et kol of Hashamayim. Va'yavei el Haadam leerot mah yikra lo v'chol asher yeekra lo Haadam nefesh chaya hu sh'mo.*

“And God, Adonai, formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the Human to see what he would call them; and whatever the Human called each living creature, that would be its name.”

Through the use of words, human beings were given the honor of naming every other animal on Earth. This continues to today – every time we speak, our words manifest our reality and even the realities of others around us. “What you dream, what you feel, and what you really are, will all be manifested through the word.”<sup>14</sup>

Just think for a moment how powerful words are. Of course we have the power to express ourselves and communicate with others. Our words can be used to build up and provide support for others. On the flip side, however, we have the power to take down and destroy. Chapter 5:1 of Pirkei Avot teaches us:

“With ten utterances the world was created. And what does this teach, for surely it could have been created with one utterance? But this was so in order to punish the wicked who destroy the world that was

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<sup>14</sup> Ibi, pg. 26

created with ten utterances, And to give a good reward to the righteous who maintain the world that was created with ten utterances.”<sup>15</sup>

**The stories we tell in our lives change, depending on where we are in our lives.** It is our struggling with our individual truths that allows for *us* to grow and mature. If we begin to tell a story in order to attract attention or to make ourselves seem “better than others,” how do we expect for others to see us? Yes, our egos play a major role in how we see ourselves AND how others see us as well. When our egos control our words and our actions, we are not owning our stories – rather we are being owned by our stories.

Now that we have established the importance of words, let’s dissect the word impeccability. “*Impeccability* means ‘without sin.’ *Impeccable* comes from the Latin *peccatus*, which means ‘sin.’ The *im* in *impeccable* means ‘without,’ so *impeccable* means ‘without sin.’”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [www.sefaria.org/Pirkei\\_Avot.5.1?lang=bi](http://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.5.1?lang=bi)

<sup>16</sup> The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom, pg. 31, Don Miguel Ruiz, 1997.

What is a sin? Most world religions (including Judaism) speak about sins and sinners. However, using this first agreement, we redefine sin to be anything that you do that goes against yourself. Ruiz teaches that when we judge or blame ourselves for anything, we are sinning. “Being impeccable is not going against yourself. When you are impeccable, you take responsibility for your actions, but you do not judge or blame yourself.”<sup>17</sup>

So, to be impeccable, we are turning sin upside down. We are no longer rejecting ourselves...the biggest sin we can commit. Impeccability leads to life – the exact opposite of sin, which leads to the mortal sin of self-rejection. Ruiz teaches it this way:

Being impeccable with your word is not using the word against yourself. If I see you in the street and I call you stupid, it appears that I’m using the word against you. But really I’m using my word against myself, because you’re going to hate me for this, and your hating me is not good for me. Therefore, if I get angry and with my word send all that emotional poison to you, I’m using the word against myself.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pg. 31

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pg. 32

In other words, if I insult you, you will hate me...but if I love you, you will love me back. Being impeccable with your word is using the word the right way, with truth and love, not just for others, but also (and maybe more importantly) for ourselves. It may sound so simple, but just agreeing to be impeccable with our own words will affect everyone and the world around us...and, yet this is so hard to do in actuality, for it may seem so foreign to us.

Allow a personal example here. I am very easily distracted by noises, a characteristic that sometimes gets in the way of my relationships with others. This is most obvious when I am at home trying to watch a game or a television program. My children love to sing...and believe it or not, I love hearing them sing...but not when I am trying to concentrate on something else. So, when I get frustrated or angry with my kids, I am really not upset with them. My intolerance is not with my

children – it is with the noises that really do bother me, even more than just a distraction sometimes.

So, what is the right way to handle that moment. It is for me to calmly tell my children I want to hear them sing and focus my intention on them. After all, if I want my children to truly feel appreciated, accepted and loved, it is up to me and my word to make them feel that way – ok, not just on me, but this is the example I am using. Or I can ask them to wait until I am able to really listen to them...if I am right in the middle of something else at that moment. Being truthful with our word is the most important and powerful aspect of being impeccable.

**The stories we tell in our lives change, depending on where we are in our lives.** In 5785, let everyone of us here begin the process of being impeccable with our words. Let us remember how much power our words have. May we begin the sometimes very difficult process of forgiving others – and of course this begins with our being able to

forgive ourselves for our faults. It is my hope that this year will prove to be a truly awe inspiring and uplifting year for all of us. Remember, as I have stated a number of times in my sermon today - **The stories we tell in our lives change, depending on where we are in our lives.** Let us be the change in our story – and let us help others to do the same!

May we all be written in the Book of Life and may each of us have a wonderful 5785. Good Yontif!