

**MODELS OF INSPIRATION:
RUTH BADER GINSBURG, JOHN LEWIS, ANTHONY FAUCI
Rosh Hashanah First Day
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Samuel Johnson, the 18th century British literary giant who helped to define the modern English language, once noted that people “more frequently need to be reminded than informed.” During the past five to six months we have been on information overload. The pandemic, politics, racial injustice, antisemitism, social unrest and violence have dominated the U.S. media. The Israeli state and society have also dealt with escalating illness and ill-at-ease. As Americans and as Jews we have been on a steady diet of unsettling and unnerving news.

So, it is not information we seek today. Rosh Hashanah, is the Day of Remembrance. Of what do we need to be reminded? We need to be reminded that even though there is yet no end in sight, there will be a way out. As a nation, as a people, we have been through difficult times before. Natural calamities and human-caused catastrophes have taken lives and blighted the spirit. We look back. We remember.

Many have tried to find a silver lining to the unprecedented realities we are experiencing. Let me be clear: there is no silver lining. There has been too much suffering, too much death, too much incompetence, too much hatred, for there to be a hidden blessing. Regrettably, we have witnessed indifference and callousness, incompetence and selfishness, conspiracy and lies. We have seen science dismissed, opportunism triumph, and politics abused.

Yet, we have also witnessed heroic efforts from extraordinary and ordinary people. We have seen common goodness and kindness in uncommon times. I could list names of people in our own community, our own congregation, that have informed, reminded and inspired us during the past six months.

So, perhaps what we need at this moment is to be reminded of those who have provided us with inspiration. Where can we find inspiration at this time? Three examples come to mind. The first is a person whose passing we have lamented and mourned since last night, even in the midst of our observance of the Holy Day. Following services we were stunned to learn of the passing of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I offer these remarks of tribute with a heavy heart, yet with gratitude and hope.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Few people can offer us better inspiration than Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court since 1993. Justice Ginsburg was born in Brooklyn in 1933. Her father was an immigrant from Odessa and her mother, the daughter of immigrant Austrian Jews.

At Cornell University, Ruth met her husband Martin. She graduated as the highest ranking female in her class. At Harvard Law School, she was one of only nine women in the class. The Dean reportedly asked: “Why are you at Harvard Law School, taking the place of a man.” When Martin took a job in New York, she transferred to Columbia Law School, where she graduated in 1959, and tied for first place in her class. Yet, as a woman, Ruth had difficulty finding employment. Justice Felix Frankfurter denied her application for clerkship.

If you feel rejected, belittled, be inspired by a woman who experienced both and persisted. She did not fit in, so she stood out. The law was against her, so she changed it. Loss and illness visited her relentlessly; she persevered. Before her 80th birthday she completed twenty pushups in one of her regular physical workout sessions. And through it all she maintained a sense of humor.

She counseled, “In every good marriage, it helps sometimes to be a little deaf.” That applies to every relationship worth having.

Instead of anger, she demonstrated resolve. She taught, “Don’t be distracted by emotions like anger, envy, resentment. These just zap energy and waste time.” Justice Ginsburg reminds us and inspires us to use our time wisely. Her career was shaped by brilliance, undaunted perseverance and realistic optimism. She has been a defender of women’s rights and gender equality. She authored the opinion that dismantled The Virginia’s Military Institute’s male-only admissions policy. She was the first Supreme Court Justice to officiate at a same sex wedding.

Ruth Bader Ginsberg encouraged us with the words: “Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.” She was not only an institution. She was a movement.

Our tradition regards the death of a person during the High Holy Day’s season as a sign of honor and special approval – a recognition of the righteousness of the person – a *Tzaddik* – or if a woman, a *Tzadeket*.

In her chambers, Justice Ginsburg displays the biblical injunction which is our own Congregation’s motto: *Zedeck Zedeck Tirdof* - “Justice, Justice shall you pursue,” (Deut. 16:20). Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s persistent striving for justice and equality, and her ability to see beyond the moment, is inspired by the teaching of our sages: *Lo aleikha* ... “It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work; but neither are you free to desist from trying” (Pirkei Avot).

John Lewis

If Ruth Bader Ginsburg is a source of inspiration in the field of jurisprudence, the late Congressman John Robert Lewis stands out as a social justice hero. As a young civil rights leader, he modeled non-violence, endured repeated beatings and incarceration, and went on to spend three decades in Congress advancing legislation for causes that were his life’s passion.

Born in Alabama to a family of sharecroppers, John attended segregated public schools. Inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, John became a minister, not to preach about things “over yonder,” but to deal with the “problems people are facing in their lives right now”. During the 1961 anti-segregation Freedom Rides, he was severely beaten and left at a bus station in Montgomery unconscious. An organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, he was the youngest speaker at the Lincoln Memorial.

Two years later, John helped to lead over 600 people from Selma to Montgomery. At the Edmund Pettus Bridge, state troopers launched a savage attack with bull whips, tear gas, and nightsticks, and charged at the peaceful marchers with their horses. Lewis’ skull was fractured. That event known as “Bloody Sunday” sparked the public outrage that moved Congress to pass the landmark Voting Rights Act, signed into law by President Johnson in 1965. For over three decades John Lewis advanced health care reform, improvements in education and efforts to eradicate poverty. He was regarded as the moral compass of Congress.

John Lewis entered the congressional race in 1986 competing against the tall, handsome and charismatic, Julian Bond. Ever humble and dry-witted, Lewis campaigned: “Vote for the tugboat, not the showboat.” Tugboats are the vessels that push or pull larger, flashier boats through narrow harbors or canals. Lewis pulled Congress through narrow passages it was reluctant to travel without his push. We give names to the larger ships and launch them with bottles of champagne. But it is the modest tugboat, plainer, smaller, hard-working, that takes us home. Lewis’ legacy inspires us all to push and pull, so that we may find ourselves back home again in a more perfect union.

He cautioned: “Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Do not be bitter or hostile. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Never be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”

Like his mentor, Dr. King, John Lewis believed that “Hate is too heavy a burden to bear.” He forgave George Wallace, Alabama’s segregationist Governor in the 1960s. He never abandoned his belief in nonviolence; he never gave up on the dream of American democracy, despite its flaws. Congressman Lewis was a man of principle. He refused to participate in Louis Farrakhan’s 1995 Million Man March and denounced him as antisemitic. He would always emphasize, “I follow my conscience, not my complexion.”

Congressman Lewis died July 17, 2020. His body was respectfully carried by horse drawn caisson over the same bridge in Selma on which he was savagely beaten one Sunday in 1965. John Lewis models the rabbinic teaching, “In a place where no one behaves like a human being, you strive to be a human being” (Pirkei Avot).

Anthony Fauci

Last, but not least, my final model for inspiration is Dr. Anthony Fauci. Described as “one of the most trusted medical figures in the United States,” he had been, until recently side-lined, the most prominent figure of The White House’s Coronavirus Task Force since January of this year.

Born in Brooklyn, Tony attended a Catholic High School where, despite his 5’ 7” build, he was the basketball team captain. Following medical training he joined the National Institute of Health and became the Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) in 1984. He has led U.S. efforts against a series of viral diseases, including HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and currently, COVID-19.

Despite pressure from the White House, Dr. Fauci has advocated from the beginning of the pandemic self-isolation guidelines, social distancing, PPE measures, and sound medicine. His comments have often been met with hostile responses from the Administration and with efforts to downplay influence. His and his family’s life has been physically threatened.

Fauci convinced the President not to reopen the country by Easter, drawing the ire of the religious right. With good humor, diplomatic but direct language, Dr. Fauci has stayed true to his message and warned against a “false narrative [of] comfort...” and the dangers of “false complacency.” He has challenged the aversion to and suspicion of evidentiary science of many in the administration and has stood against the politicization of public health.

Speaking at Johns Hopkins University’s commencement, Dr. Fauci encouraged the graduates to: “...stay strong and unflinching. The country and the world need your talent, your energy, your resolve and your character.” And the world needs those qualities not just from medical students but from each of us.

What can we learn from a person so brilliant who can speak with full command of his subject matter with clarity and with modesty? How does he manage to gain both the respect of the powerful and of the public, staying true to the course and the cause, despite pressure to change his message? How does he reprove without insulting? How does he honor the truth even when inconvenient? Can we? Can Dr. Fauci inspire us to acknowledge the truth, even when it is when it is painful, even when it challenges our long held assumptions?

Anthony Fauci’s example reminds us that a “democracy is more than a voting system. It is a culture that respects truth” (quote from Jason Stanley, Yale University). He honors the rabbinic

teaching: “Do not be like those who serve the boss in order to be rewarded; rather be like those who serve without expectation of reward, but in reverence of godly values” (Pirkei Avot).

Jewish tradition speaks of the *Lamed Vavnicks*’ – the Thirty Sixers – “36 righteous people for whose sake the world endures.” We do not know who they are; they do not know that they are. But their labors, their wisdom, their sense of justice and compassion sustain and uphold the world. When one dies he or she is replaced – we do not know by whom.

The ancient sage Ben Sirah, asked: “Where can wisdom be found, where is the place of understanding? When a wise person dies, how can she be replaced?”

I believe that the three people I have talked about with you this morning, are not merely “heroes” – they are *Tzaddikim* – part of the entourage of the “36 Righteous.” Two have passed away in recent months. May the third live long and productively. May we all labor, individually and together, to be their surrogates, their allies, their partners in voice and in deed.

These are the models for inspiration I offer you on these unprecedented High Holy Days: The Hutzpah of Ruth Bader Ginsburg; the principled “good trouble” of John Lewis; and the undaunted commitment to reason and truth of Dr. Anthony Fauci. May we gather wisdom, courage and hope from their example as we begin a New Year.