

Rosh HaShanah 5773
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Bob developed nearly every symptom he studied in his first year of medical school. When Bob called his brother-in-law and said, “Shawn, I have leprosy,” Shawn had no idea how to console poor Bob because Bob had just been through an entire week of menopause.

Watch the news—murder, molestations, robbery, revolution, lying politicians, doping athletes, theater shootings, roadside bombs—and you start to think that the news is an accurate ratio of negative to positive in the world; that the news is the world.

An east coast boarding school decides to program a wellness week for their students. On Monday they had the world’s leading expert on adolescent depression. Tuesday night was school violence and bullying. Wednesday night—eating disorders. Thursday night, illicit drug use and Friday, they chose risky sex. The school administrators really believed they had planned a wellness week when in fact what they planned was a sickness week.

A Harvard undergrad applied on a dare, didn’t expect to get in and his family had no money for college. He did get in and got a military scholarship too. Suddenly something that wasn’t even a possibility became a reality. “When I went there,” he remembers, “I assumed everyone else would see it as a privilege and be excited to be there. Even if you’re in a classroom full of people smarter than you, you’d be happy just to be in that classroom, which is what I felt. But what I found there is no matter how happy they were with their original success of getting into Harvard, after two weeks, everyone’s brains were focused not on the privilege of being there, but on the competition, the hassles, the stresses, the complaints.”

“Rabbi, in just two more weeks he would have been 90,” a son tells me as we prepare for the funeral. “In another year they would have reached their 65th anniversary,” says the daughter. I understand their disappointment, but I also remind them that 89 years and 50 weeks of life, and 64 years of marriage are full, whole, beautiful blessings.

We live in a spiritually backwards society. Often, when we have a success we change the definition of what success looks like. We got good grades, now we have to get better grades. We hit our sales target, we change our sales target. We lost a few pounds; the waif next to us lost more. We keep moving the finish line so that success is always on the opposite side of where we are and we never get there. Or, as a friend of mine likes to put it, “A sad Jew, is a happy Jew.”

Even when we do stop to count our blessings, we often count the wrong things. Two thousand years ago the Talmud reminded us that to be rich is to be satisfied with what we have already accomplished. Forty-four years ago Robert Kennedy said GDP “measures everything, except that which makes life worthwhile.” My Yiddish-speaking grandmother put it another way, “A burial shroud,” she quipped, “has no pockets.”

The Polish psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik proved that when you show people a picture of a circle with a small wedge cut out of it, their eyes go to the missing piece and miss the much larger whole every time.

We all miss a lot don't we?

That's where tonight comes in. There is a reason that Rosh HaShanah comes before Yom Kippur...there is a reason that tonight there is no mention of sin in the prayer book, only hope for a better tomorrow. You would think that we would first confess our sins, cleanse ourselves and then celebrate the New Year. But that is as spiritually backwards as constantly moving the finish line in a race. The Jewish way is first to affirm all that is good and right and just and beautiful in the world and in ourselves, and then get to work becoming better—first Rosh HaShanah, then Yom Kippur.

If you really want to change your life—really change—stop moving the goal post and wake up to the blessed life you already have.

My friend who is a successful comedy writer and I had lunch a few weeks ago. “I hit such a small target with my life,” is how he put it. “Whoever said there's no justice is right. Thank God there is no justice. If there was justice I would be a slave in a factory or bent over in a field someplace like most of the world instead

of getting hit over the head with a bag of dimes every time I say something funny.”

“Ok. We get it rabbi. We’re lucky. We’re not starving. We’re not living in a hovel. But things go wrong in our lives—terribly, painfully wrong.”

I know. Believe me, I know. I know when my phone rings and a family needs to find a treatment program for an addicted teenager, or when the call comes asking if I know of a good family law attorney or if I know of a job opening somewhere, anywhere. And I know when I stand in my closet at the end of so many long days, pondering the tear stains on my suit coat as I reach for a hanger; that evaporate from holding you earlier that day saying *Kaddish* before an open grave.

And what is *Kaddish* after all, if not a counting of our blessings when that is such a difficult thing to do? When we least feel like it, when we would rather sink into the very ground and die ourselves, when we feel so terribly cursed, we are commanded to stand, to stand up and affirm the blessing of life and all its greatness.

“Imagine, if you will—a gift,” writes Stacey Kramer. “It's not too big—about the size of a golf ball. It's going to do incredible things for you. It will bring all of your family together. You will feel loved and appreciated like never before and reconnect with friends and acquaintances you haven't heard from in years. Adoration and admiration will overwhelm you. It will recalibrate what's most important in your life.

It will redefine your sense of spirituality and faith. You'll have a new understanding and trust in your body. You'll have unsurpassed vitality and energy. You'll expand your vocabulary, meet new people, and you'll have a healthier lifestyle. And get this—you'll have an eight-week vacation of doing absolutely nothing. You'll eat countless gourmet meals. Flowers will arrive by the truckload. People will say to you, "You look great. Have you had any work done?" And you'll have a lifetime supply of good drugs.

You'll be challenged, inspired, motivated and humbled,” Stacey continues. “Your life will have new meaning. Peace, health, serenity, happiness, nirvana. The price? \$55,000, and that's an incredible deal. This gift came to me about five months

ago. It was a rare gem—a brain tumor, hemangioblastoma—the gift that keeps on giving. And while I'm okay now, I wouldn't wish this gift for you. I'm not sure you'd want it. But I wouldn't change my experience. It profoundly altered my life in amazing ways I didn't expect. So the next time you're faced with something that's unexpected, unwanted and uncertain, consider that it just may be a gift.”

Ironically, it's easier to count your blessings when you have cancer. Thankfully, most of us don't. We lead pretty ordinary lives. But that's also a challenge, because it's hard to appreciate just how extraordinary ordinary really is. And that's where being a Jew possesses its greatest spiritual power.

If you ask me to define Judaism in a sentence I would say, “It is the sanctification of the mundane.” You're about to eat a strawberry? There's a blessing for it. What about a handful of grapes? There's a blessing for that, too. How about if you see a rainbow or survive a dangerous situation or just wake up to experience another morning of life? Yes. A blessing for the way our bodies work? Yes. A blessing to keep our tongue in check each day when we would rather gossip and snipe? Yes.

Almost all Jews know the *motzi*, the prayer over bread. Why, why a blessing over something as ordinary as bread? It's simple of course...if we can be grateful for bread, then we can be grateful for the other, greater blessings of life as well. Ideally, the Jew takes no small thing for granted.

Consider the elderly woman who was walking terribly bent over, hunched and in pain. Finally she went to the doctor and the next day her friend saw her walking completely upright and pain free.

“It's a miracle,” her friend exclaimed. “Look at you walking tall and smiling.”

“Miracle schmiracle,” the woman said. “The doctor just gave me a longer cane.”

You see, sometimes the smallest things make the biggest difference.

It is a wise person, a wise and a happier person, a more successful person, a better person, who affirms the enoughness, the beauty, the miracle of bread.

"I got out of bed on two strong legs. It might have been otherwise," wrote the poet Jane Kenyon.

"I ate cereal, sweet milk, a ripe, flawless peach. It might have been otherwise. I took the dog uphill to the birch wood. All morning I did the work I love. At noon I laid down with my mate. It might have been otherwise.

We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks. It might have been otherwise. I slept in a bed in a room with paintings on the walls, and planned another day just like this day.

But one day, I know, it will be otherwise."

Kenyon wrote this poem in 1993, upon hearing her husband's cancer diagnosis. Ironically, it was Kenyon, not her husband, who died a year later from a fierce and swift onslaught of leukemia. "Otherwise," came unexpectedly, with the sunrise one day, with no regard for the silver candlesticks, the paintings, the birch wood, or the flawless peach.

After all these years of being a rabbi all I wish to tell you tonight is that "You are enough. You are enough just as you are. You are worthy of appreciation and gratitude and warmth and love. You do not need to move the finish line further away. You are enough. And you have enough. And you will always have enough and you will always be enough if you just look at how much you have, how many you love, how many who love you. And then, remember it could be otherwise.

This year, give the people you are here with tonight the greatest gift of all. Let them know, let him know, let her know, say it tonight sometime, say it every day: "I have enough. I am enough, because I have you. You are a blessing to me. You are a miracle. Life is a miracle, for which I shall be grateful every day in this New Year."