

The Day When Everything Changed

Leyl Rosh HaShana 5767

Temple Shir Tikva

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There's a story that's told that frequently makes its rounds on the internet:

An American businessman vacations regularly in a coastal village on a Caribbean island. He is sitting at the pier when a local fisherman returns to the dock in his small boat. Inside the boat are two yellowfin tuna that the fisherman has just caught on the morning's excursion. The American greets the fisherman and compliments on the quality of his beautiful fish, and he asks him how long it took him to catch them.

"Not too long," replies the local, "Just a short trip out from the bay this morning."

The American asks him how come he didn't stay out a little longer this morning and take the time to catch more.

The fisherman tells him that these two are all he needs for his family. Each day he catches what he needs, then returns to shore. Then the visitor asks him, "But – what do you do with the rest of your time?"

The fisherman says, "I sleep late, I fish a little, play with my children, go for a long afternoon walk with my wife, and stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my neighbors in the pub. I have a full and busy life."

The American says to him, "Well, I'm an Ivy-League MBA, and I can help you. You see, here's what you should do: You should spend more time fishing each day, and then you'll be able to buy a bigger boat with the proceeds of what you make. And then with the profits from the bigger boat, you'll be able to buy several boats. Just imagine: Eventually you will have a fleet of fishing boats all your own. Instead of selling your daily catch to a middle man, you could sell directly to a processor and then open your own cannery on the island. Once you control the product, processing, and distribution, you would need, of course, to leave this remote fishing village and move to the capital – or maybe Miami, or even LA or New York, where you'll be able to run your enterprise."

The fisherman listened to all this very politely. Then he said, "But sir – how long would all that take?"

"Fifteen, maybe twenty years."

"And then what would happen?"

"Well that's the sweetest part. That's when all your hard work pays off. When the time is right, you announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public – and you'll make millions."

"Millions? Really?"

"Sure. It happens all the time."

"And then what?"

"Then what? That's the payoff. Then you get to retire to a small fishing village, where you can sleep late, fish a little, play with your children, go for long afternoon walks with your wife, and stroll into the village each evening where you'll sip wine and play guitar with your neighbors in the pub."¹

The *Yamim Noraim* have arrived again, and with them the opportunity – like the fisherman in the story -- to focus awareness on the things in our lives that are most precious and important. Rosh HaShana 5767 is here, and let's consider what this day is all about.

Don't let anybody tell you that Rosh HaShana is the "Jewish New Year" – it's not true. Rosh HaShana marks a new year – but what kind of new year is it, exactly? A Jewish one? According to the Mishna there is a "Jewish" new year: it takes place in the springtime, during the month of Nisan. That's the season of Pesach, the time when the Jewish people coalesced from a motley collection of clans into one nation. That's the New Year for Jews. We have other New Years: the beginning of the school year; the start of baseball season; the fiscal year; the agricultural season. Rosh HaShana, the first of Tishrei, the seventh month, on the cusp of autumn, is none of those things.

Rosh HaShana is our celebration of the creation of the world. The whole world, as described in the Book of Genesis. Rosh HaShana is not the "Jewish" New Year; it is the world's new year.

But even that does not tell the whole story about this incredible day laid out before us. For the consensus among the Rabbis of old is this: Rosh HaShana, celebrating creation, does not mark the first day of creation in the Torah, as in "Let there be light..." No, Rosh HaShana marks the culmination of creation. The sixth day. The creation of human beings.

In other words, this is the day when humankind came into being, with all of its passions and lusts and striving for holiness and its brutality and its war-making and its poetry and its technology and everything else that makes us human. This is the day when we were created in the past—and this is the day when we can re-create ourselves as well.

For this is also the time of *Teshuvah*, which means peering deeply within ourselves and taking stock, taking inventory of our lives. What do we do best, and how can we amplify those good things in the year to come? What do we do that is destructive and hurtful to those we love, and how can we stop doing those things in the year to come? This is a day of creation, and it is a time for re-creation as well.

Easier said than done, it's true. Perhaps that's why we spend so much of these Days of Awe inside the synagogue, in reflection, prayer, and meditation. For change is difficult for anyone. However, we all know people who have made substantial changes in their lives – and some of us have been able to do it as well.

Now, I want you to reflect for a moment on **THAT DAY**: the day when everything changed, the day when everything became different. It was the day when you made conscious decision in your life that there was no more time to waste; that the some changes had to be made, and we were going to get back on the right path do devoting our lives to, well, to good...

You remember which day I'm talking about, right?

Well, the truth is, it could be any day, because for every person the day is different. But I was reflecting on how many people have a "THAT DAY" – a *bayom ha-hu* – in their lives, when you reflect that there was my life up until that day, and my life afterwards, forever changed.

What day was it? Well, for some it might be the day when "The Accident" happened, or after The Surgery, or an Unexpected Diagnosis. It might be the day when a job was unexpectedly lost or found; or when we made a momentous decision to no longer spend the rest of our lives with this spouse, or that the person we were seeing was indeed the person we wanted

¹. Adapted from internet sources and Rabbi Steven Z. Leder, *More Money Than G-d*, Santa Monica, CA: Volt Press, 2003, p.98.

to spend the rest of our lives with. Maybe it was a day when an unexpected windfall was received, or the day that the pregnancy test came back positive. Maybe you have a day like that in your story.

Furthermore, on a community-wide scale, we have known “THAT DAY.” Consider the people of the South who were ravaged by Katrina a year ago: certainly there are many who mark their lives before and after THAT DAY.

The assassinations of President Kennedy, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Yitzchak Rabin were days when life was changed forever for many people. And five years ago, of course, was the most significant THAT DAY that Americans communally have ever experienced.

The Talmud had a “THAT DAY” as well. It’s discussed in Tractate *Berachot*, and it speaks of a political coup that occurred in the 1st Century on the day that Rabban Gamliel was deposed by his fellow rabbis.² Only Talmud students remember that day now, but it was traumatic to a generation of our ancestors nearly 2,000 years ago. The Talmud says, “**Every time we read the words ‘THAT DAY,’ it refers to THAT DAY** (when Rabban Gamliel was removed from office.)”

So the question is – when, for you, was THAT DAY, the day when everything was changed?

Many of those experiences are moments when we experience for the first time the reality of our own mortality; the awareness that we will, someday, die.

So what do people do? We resolve to live our lives differently from here on out. We make promises to ourselves and deals with G-d to focus on those things we once recognized as “the truly important things in life.” We say to ourselves: I’m going to live my life differently. I’m going to hug my kids more, and tell the whole family everyday that I love them. I’m going to refuse to define myself by my work, and step back from a workaholic schedule. I’m going to call friends across the country and let them know I love them; I’m going to reacquaint myself with my religious tradition; I’m going to say a prayer of gratitude to G-d every single day.

We say: I’m going to give more to Tzedakah. I’m going to do more volunteer work. I’m going to focus on being a force for good, and not take life for granted. We say all these things.

And for many of us, six months later life is back to business as usual. Not in a cynical way; it’s simply that the human brain seems to be hot-wired to revert to certain default positions. Life goes on, and we revert to our old routines.

Or perhaps not. There are many people I know who truly changed their lives in all sorts of extraordinary ways after reality belted them. Some dedicated a portion of their lives to serious Mitzvah-work.

For many people it seems, a day came when the Meaning of Existence (and the fact that life is short) jolted them awake, and they changed their lives.

And it strikes me today, that perhaps the whole point of the Mitzvah-system of Judaism, and maybe all religious living in general, is precisely this: To give us that sense of a grander reality without the near-death experience. Wouldn’t it be glorious if we could live our lives with a daily sense of gratitude for life’s blessings, with a sense of walking in G-d’s imminent presence, with a sense of purpose and meaning in every act and every life we touch? Wouldn’t it be nice if we could have that consciousness, that awareness, without the almost-dying part?

Perhaps that’s what all religious living is about.

² Talmud *Berachot* 27b-28a

The Mitzvah-system comes along to teach us such things: Honor our parents; love our neighbors; Rest and re-soul ourselves one day each week. Be aware of what goes into our mouths (these are the laws of keeping Kosher) and Be aware of what goes out of our mouths (these are the laws of *shmirat ha-lashon*).

The truly brilliant thing about Jewish life is that it isn't just built on hoary values and warm sentiments. Judaism is a code of behavior. The sages who molded our tradition recognized that it is human nature to not live up to our highest ideals each and every waking moment, and it is not human nature – except for the great kabbalists among us – to stand in the shadow of G-d's presence continually throughout our day. And so a series of primary Jewish actions – that's how I define "Mitzvah" – was designed to cultivate that behavior with positive reinforcement. Judaism is very behaviorist in that sense.

This is not an argument for Orthodoxy; but it is an argument against aligning Judaism with secularism. Consider how a child who is raised to never put a *siddur* or a *chumash* on the ground and to kiss it if it falls is being raised to respect tradition.

Consider the difference in attitude between the morning rituals between these two individuals: One awakens in the morning to a blaring alarm clock, utters some profanity as the first spoken words of the day, and pushes the snooze button trying to grab a few more minutes of sleep. The other awakens and, in that first moment of consciousness, says with our tradition: **שְׁחַחֲזַרְתָּ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי** : I give thanks to You, O living G-d, **מִוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ, מֵלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם** : **בְּחַמְלָה** : for you have restored this precious soul to me anew! It changes the way you interact with the world. It changes the amount of G-dliness you have in your life.

Consider how a child who regularly sees his parents give Tzedakah will relate to money differently in his lifetime. The child will learn the preciousness of money by learning of the real and awesome power money has to transform the world. If you want to avoid raising greedy children, teach them how to give money away – Jewishly.

Consider how a child who grows up in a home surrounded by Jewish books that are taken down and read will relate to her heritage in a different manner.

Doing Mitzvot brings those moments into our lives. Those ephemeral values are made real. Mitzvot are designed so that we don't just become people who talk about G-d and goodness and compassion all day; who wants to be around people like that? Mitzvot bring G-d and goodness and compassion into our lives. They remind us of what is truly important by thrusting those things in front of us every day.

One of the great rabbis of our time, Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, describes the Path of Life as one being encrusted with Mitzvah opportunities, baked into the ground as jewels. Here is his gorgeous metaphor:

I try to walk the road of Judaism. Embedded in that road are many jewels. One is marked "Sabbath" and one "Civil Rights" and one "Kashrut" and one "Honor Your Parents" and one "Study Torah" and one "You Shall Be Holy." There are at least 613 of them, and they are of different shapes and sizes and weights. Some are light and easy for me to pick up, and I pick them up. Some are too deeply embedded for me – so far at least, though I get a little stronger by trying to extricate the jewels as I walk the street. Some, perhaps, I shall never be able to pick up. I believe that G-d expects me to keep on walking Judaism Street and to carry away whatever I can of its

commandments. I do not believe that G-d expects me to lift what I cannot, nor may I condemn my fellow Jew who may not be able to pick up even as much as I can.³

In Rabbi Wolf's image, the treasures of Jewish living are to be found all around us. To collect their rewards simply requires the work of lifting them up and dusting them off.

Like the Caribbean fisherman in the story, we know intuitively what the most precious things in life are. Loving relationships. Making a difference for good in the world. Knowing who you are, and knowing where you are going. Yet – we are more like the American visitor to the docks. We have allowed ourselves to be re-routed from the path of what is truly most precious. We have lost our way.

Let this Rosh HaShana be THAT DAY – the day when the work of turning begins. Allow this to be The Day when we return home, realizing that life all around us is infused with blessing, if only we know how to look.

Rosh HaShana has just barely begun. We have ten days between now and Yom Kippur to peer deeply within our souls and to determine what kind of year it is going to be. We cannot control everything about our destinies: health and success, war and peace, there is much that is simply beyond our control, in G-d's hands. But there is much that we can control. The grace and joy with which we encounter life; the perseverance and humor that we bring to each day's encounters. These are within our control. And the rubrics of Jewish day-to-day-living are there to help us bring moments of G-dliness in, every step along the way.

The students of the Kotzker Rebbe were once startled out of their seats when he turned to them and said, "*Chevra*, where is G-d to be found?" Surprised, they offered a few meager answers, none of which pleased the rebbe. "G-d can be found," he said to them, "Wherever you let G-d in."⁴

May 5767 be a year of many holy moments, inflected by countless opportunities to let G-d in, each and every day.

Amen.

³. Arnold Jacob Wolf, *Unfinished Rabbi*, Chicago, Ivan R. Dee: 1998, p.vii-viii.

⁴. Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters*, New York: Schocken, 1947, p.277.