

Making a Living, Making a Life

Rabbi Richard A. Block

The Temple – Tifereth Israel

Cleveland, OH

Yizkor Sermon, Yom Kippur 5777 - 2016

In a recent column, "The Moral Bucket List," David Brooks contended that there are "two sets of virtues, resume virtues and eulogy virtues." Resume virtues are skills and accomplishments we "bring to the marketplace." Eulogy virtues are the kind described at one's funeral. Brooks points out that our culture and educational systems "spend more time teaching the skills and strategies [needed] for career success" and "external achievement" than on fostering the development of qualities that build inner character. The result, he argues, is a large gap between our actual and desired selves. As the character Paul, asks in the musical, *A Chorus Line*, "Who am I anyway? Am I my resume? That is a picture of a person I don't know."

Jewish tradition understands that work is both necessary and meritorious. The Torah commands, "Six days shall you labor..." The Talmudic sage, Rabbi Judah, used to say, "Great is labor, for it honors the person who does it." Another, Shemayah, taught, "Love work." But while Jewish tradition applauds work, and admires some occupations especially – physicians, for example, because they save lives, and attorneys and judges, who promote justice – it is not much concerned with our choice of career. The Talmud recounts a favorite saying of the rabbis of Yavneh. "I am God's creature and my fellow is God's creature: my work is in the town and his work is in the field; I rise early for my

work, and he to his. Just as he could not excel at my occupation, I could not excel at his. You might say that I do much and he does little, but we are taught, 'One may accomplish much or little; it matters not, so long as one directs one's heart to heaven.'"

Making a living is important, but what matters most is making a life.

A life of meaning and purpose, worthy of being celebrated, remembered, and emulated, is what Judaism aims to help us fashion. It encourages us: to engage in study and prayer, and acts of goodness, generosity and service; to see each day as a precious opportunity to give and receive love and make the world more kind and just; and, when we must depart, to leave the world better off than we found it. In short, Judaism holds that each of us is born with the identical, pre-assigned calling: to be a mensch. As Rabbi Jacob Rudin z"l put it, "When we are dead, and people weep for us and grieve, let it be because we touched their lives with beauty and simplicity. Let it not be said that life was good to *us*, but rather that *we* were good to *life*."

It is certainly possible to draw the distinction between "resume" and "eulogy virtues," too sharply. Scholarly attainments, professional success, personal achievements and honors are satisfying sources of pride, and worthy of note, even in a eulogy. But being privileged to have countless people describe deceased loved ones to me, I can testify that the most moving and heartfelt tributes describe admirable virtues and values, cherished lessons taught, loving and nurturing relationships, and deep devotion to things that are more significant and enduring than our individual selves.

The difference between resume and eulogy virtues can be seen in a story from the 1968 Olympics. Tommy Smith and John Carlos, African-American runners, won gold

and bronze medals in the 200 yard dash. You may recall the iconic photograph of them standing on the medal podium during the playing of our national anthem. Right arms raised, each was wearing the badge of the Olympic Project for Human Rights, to protest racial discrimination in our country. As punishment, Smith and Carlos were suspended from the U.S. Olympic team and expelled from the Olympic village. Once home, they faced serious repercussions and death threats.

Peter Norman, a white Australian sprinter, was the third man on the platform. In solidarity with Smith and Carlos, he, too, wore the human rights badge. As a result, back in Australia, Norman and his family were shunned. A pariah, unable to find steady work and not allowed to rejoin his country's Olympic team, he nonetheless refused to condemn Carlos and Smith in order to save himself. Norman said, "I couldn't see why a black man couldn't drink from the same water fountain, take the same bus or go to the same school as a white man. There was a social injustice that I couldn't do anything for from where I was, but I certainly hated it. It has been said that sharing my silver medal with that incident on the victory dais detracted from my performance. On the contrary, I have to confess, I was rather proud to be part of it."

In time, Smith and Carlos were recognized as heroes in the struggle for racial justice and human rights. At San Jose State University, a statue portrays them on the Olympic medal platform. The silver medal step, Norman's, is empty. Some have called for a statue of him to be added to the tableau, but Norman wanted it left as it was, so visitors could step up and have their picture taken standing in solidarity with Smith and Carlos, and with all who battle for civil rights, as he had done. Norman died of a heart

attack in 2006. Smith and Carlos were pallbearers. The men's athletic achievements are long surpassed, but their courage continues to inspire.

In his magisterial novel, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Amos Oz writes of his father, Yehuda Klausner. A bookish man who dreamed of becoming a bestselling author, Klausner would print small batches of his books and send them to a Jerusalem bookstore, where they would languish. One day, the proprietor called to tell him they had been sold. The good news motivated him to keep writing. Some time thereafter, Oz visited Israel Zarchi, a friend of his father's, another impoverished author. When Zarchi left the room to get him a cup of cocoa, Amos noticed his father's books on a shelf. Zarchi had bought them all. When Zarchi returned and saw Oz eyeing the books, he put his finger to his lips, as if to say, "Don't tell your father." Oz wrote, "I have many close and dear friends. And yet, I am not sure that I could do for any of them what Israel Zarchi did for my father. Israel Zarchi was poor. He lived hand to mouth. At a certain moment, he must have said to himself, 'I can either buy some clothes that I need, or I can buy the three copies of Klausner's book.' And he chose to buy my father's book." Zarchi died young, and his writings were lost in the archives of Jewish literature, but his singular act of generosity and friendship is now immortalized.

Karen Regan Jaffe, a distinguished Cleveland physician with a sterling resume, retired in 2013 due to Parkinson's disease. Refusing to let it defeat her, Karen, and her husband Marc founded Shaking with Laughter, a non-profit that raises money for the Michael J. Fox Foundation. Their daughter, Jana, wrote, ""In some backwards way, this disease and experience has been a blessing in disguise. It has helped me discover

myself, who I am, and what I want to do with the rest of my life. So I can't thank you enough mom for suffering through the tremors, shuffling feet, sleepless nights, early retirement, illegible handwriting, doctors appointments, medicines, anticipation of worsening symptoms (you know the rest of the list), so that I could find my purpose and place in life." Karen replied, "I am proud to be your mother. I am proud...and grateful that you have taken something that has been hard for all of us and, with it, found your way. I know that your compassion and kindness will serve you well." July 6th was Jana's first day of medical school. She plans to study neurology and movement disorders.

Travis Rudolph is an award winning wide receiver for the Florida State Seminoles, a star athlete whose resume is already impressive. But what he may be best known for now is the seemingly mundane act of sitting down to lunch. On a goodwill visit with his teammates to Montford Middle School in Tallahassee, Rudolph saw Bo Paske, a 6th grader, sitting alone, and asked if he could eat with him. Bo replied, "Sure, why not?" So Rudolph sat down and the two struck up a conversation. Unbeknownst to Rudolph, Bo is on the autism spectrum. His mom describes him as a super sweet child with a smile and a hug for everyone he meets, but most days, he eats lunch by himself. She wrote, "Those are the days I feel sad for him...[but this was] one day I didn't have to worry if my sweet boy ate lunch alone, because he sat across from someone who is a hero in many eyes." Asked how he felt, Bo said, "It was kind of like me sitting on a rainbow."

The story is told of Alfred Nobel, who invented dynamite and amassed his

fortune producing explosives. When Nobel's brother died, a newspaper ran a long obituary of Alfred, in the erroneous belief that he was the deceased. In effect, Nobel had the rarest of opportunities: to read his own obituary. He was horrified to find himself described as having made it possible to kill more people more quickly than anyone who had ever lived. Realizing that this was how he would be remembered, he set out to change that by establishing the Nobel Prizes.

Sir Moses Montefiore, the great British Jew, was one of the 19th century's leading figures, knighted by Queen Victoria, philanthropic to Jews and non-Jews alike. On his 100th birthday, the London Times praised him in an editorial. "He has shown," it wrote, "that fervent Judaism and patriotic citizenship are absolutely consistent with one another." Once, he was asked, "Sir Moses, what are you worth?" He thought it over and named a figure. "Surely," the man responded, "your wealth is much greater than that." Montefiore replied, "You didn't ask me how much I own. You asked me how much I am worth. So I calculated how much I have given to charity this year. You see, we are worth what we are willing to share with others."

In January 2015, a dear friend of Susie's and mine from California, Lori Luft, a distinguished psychotherapist, was diagnosed with Stage IV gastric cancer that had metastasized to numerous other organs. While she was determined to fight for life, the prognosis was dire. Within days of her diagnosis, recognizing that her health crisis would not allow her to be fully attentive to her patients, Lori found others to care for them and closed her practice, then set out on what she called her "treatment journey."

In a series of 34 courageous, eloquent, and inspiring blog essays over the next

year, Lori kept those of us who loved her informed, described her many blessings - foremost among them her husband, Hal, their daughters, Shira and Jana, and their grandson, Solomon, who had stolen her heart – and she shared reflections on her life. In her final posting, on January 1, 2016, two weeks before she died, Lori described her feelings of “acceptance, gratitude, and a sense of completion.” She wrote, “When I’ve been thinking about the end of my life, I’ve been largely picturing sadness. Today, I had a new vision of feeling at peace surrounded by loved ones...All along this journey, I have been experiencing extraordinary levels of high regard from family, friends and community. That has promoted my increasing self-acceptance that makes this new vision [of peace] possible. In essence, I feel I’ve had a life well lived.” Lori’s resume was sterling. But her lasting legacy resides not in her many achievements, but in the lives she touched for good. Lori taught us how to live, how to love, and how to leave this life behind, with humility, dignity, and grace.

The High Holy Days ask us probing questions: “Is our priority making a living or making a life?” “On what basis do we want our life’s worth to be measured? How do we hope to be remembered?” As Yom Kippur enters its final hours, and we remember for blessing the loved ones who went before us, let us consider those questions in light of their lives and examples. When we return home and break our fast with life-sustaining nourishment, let us not treat these days of awe as a closed book, only to be reopened a year hence, if we are blessed with another year of life. Let us, rather, cherish the insights we gained during this sacred season as we grappled with our failings and strengths, our hopes and possibilities, with the choices we made and those we may yet

make. Let us remember how clearly we saw revealed the gap between our present selves and our best selves. And let us seize the opportunities each day offers to enhance our lives' meaning, purpose, and lasting worth, as we continue the journey our prayerbook calls a "sacred pilgrimage, from birth, to death, to life everlasting."

Keyn y'hi l'ratzon – May this be God's will, and our own.