

*The Meaning of the Miracle of You*

**Rabbi Richard A. Block**

**The Temple – Tifereth Israel, Cleveland OH**

**Rosh Hashanah 5778 \* 2017**

The story is told of a rabbi who delivered the same High Holy Day sermon two years in a row. Afterward, a congregant complained, "Rabbi, you gave the identical sermon last year." "True," the rabbi replied, "but you didn't do what I told you." In a similar vein, a well-known rabbi, now deceased, renowned for his self-regard, was once challenged for repeating a sermon. He responded, "My dear, Shakespeare's plays weren't written for a single performance!"

These quips came to mind when I posted on Facebook, asking recently, or soon-to-be retired colleagues to share the themes of their final High Holy Day sermons. One replied that he made no reference to his impending retirement; he wanted people to remember him doing what he'd always done. He reported disappointing congregants who expected something more momentous, given the significance of the milestone. A more provocative suggestion was, "Give the sermons you were afraid they'd fire you for." I'm keeping that idea in mind for Yom Kippur!

Two colleagues said they had, in fact, reprised their best or best-received sermons, one of them insisting, "I wasn't being lazy." Perhaps not, but he certainly spared himself considerable time and effort. Surely, I thought, among the hundred twenty or so High Holy Day sermons I've delivered over the years,

at least *a few* must be worthy of repetition! And anyway, who would notice? As a congregant once said, "Rabbi, I can't remember what it was, but something you said left a deep and lasting impression." Though a tiny bit tempted, I dismissed the notion of resurrecting Rabbi Rick's Greatest Hits. The High Holy Days call for more than revivals or leftovers.

At the same time, I recall an interview in 1982, when I was about to be ordained. The rabbi of a large synagogue asked, "If you could only give one sermon, what would be the topic?" As best I recall, I replied, "It seems to me that, in a sense, rabbis only have one sermon, an essential message at the heart of everything they teach and preach. My core conviction," I said, "is that our deepest human longing is for meaning, and Judaism can help us attain it."

Thirty five years later, having been privileged to share the struggles and strivings, joys and sorrows of countless congregants and friends, and having known an ample measure of those myself, I reaffirm that conviction wholeheartedly. And I believe it has been the implicit or explicit message of every sermon I have delivered. In fact, it was my yearning for a more meaningful life, and the belief that I could find it in Judaism, that drew me toward the rabbinate and called me, again and again and yet again, until finally, I followed the urging of my soul.

That decision came at considerable cost to Susie, Josh and Zach, for whom I hope and pray that, on balance, its rewards have exceeded its burdens, and to our parents, of blessed memory, whose love, support and self-sacrifice

were unstinting, even when, for a while, understanding and approval eluded them.

It occurs to me now, enlightened and chastened by experience and time, that a rabbi's most impactful sermon is not one's words, but oneself. So, my final High Holy Day sermons as Senior Rabbi are an effort to sum up, in ways both familiar and fresh, what my rabbinate and life have been about, and to restate the essential message I have sought to teach and exemplify. In doing so, I am mindful of the Talmud's comforting assurance, "Words that come from the heart enter the heart."

In *Man's Search for Meaning* - a book second only to the Torah in its impact on my thinking - Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychotherapist who survived Auschwitz, writes that the question, "What is the meaning of life?" is a meaningless one, because it assumes there is a single abstraction that would endow every life with the same meaning, if only we could grasp it. But a universal meaning of that nature is not merely elusive; it is non-existent.

Instead, the ultimate question we each face is, "What is the meaning of *my* life?" As Frankl puts it, "Everything can be taken from [us] but one thing; the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." "Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment..."

"One should not search for an abstract meaning of life," he continues.

"Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out, a

concrete assignment which demands fulfillment. Therein he cannot be replaced, nor can his life be repeated. Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it..." In other words, we don't discover meaning, we choose it.

In stating that we each have a particular mission or vocation, Frankl reminds us that meaning comes from choosing to be part of things that are larger, more significant, and more enduring than our fragile, mortal, sometimes lonely and bewildered selves. Foremost among such things are the Jewish faith and the Jewish People, whose fate we share and shape. Your life and mine, though transient, are chapters in the grand, inspiring narrative of Jewish history. Among the most compelling of human sagas, ours began some 4000 years ago with an unlikely, world-changing encounter between the Creator of the Universe and an idol maker's iconoclastic son. In Abraham and Sarah, the Holy One vested the hope and possibility of a world suffused with justice, compassion, and peace, a world in which God and humanity would become one.

That aspiration was expressed in a *brit*, an eternal, unbreakable covenant among God, the two of them, and their posterity, which is to say: us. After two hundred generations of triumph and travail, creativity and fidelity, study and prayer, holiday and life cycle observances enriched by sacred custom, generations of service, *tzedakah*, and sacrifice, the Jewish People's covenant with the Holy One of Blessing endures. It helps us make life-enhancing choices through a framework of spiritual insight and ethical values validated over

millennia. It guides us in choosing between good and bad and between less and more worthwhile, between important and unimportant, superficial and substantial, ordinary and extraordinary, sacred and mundane.

Essentially, Judaism is a curriculum for forming our character and fashioning a worthy life: sharing ourselves generously with others; performing consistently the deeds by which we hope most to be remembered; striving to set an example to emulate; investing our precious life-time in things that truly matter because they make a lasting difference in the lives of others. These *mitzvot* endow our own lives with mindfulness and meaning.

It follows that meaningful choices are purposeful, and that our aims must go beyond ourselves. As Frankl puts it, "The more one forgets oneself — by giving oneself to a cause to serve or another person to love — the more human one is and the more one actualizes oneself. What is called self-actualization is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more one would miss it. In other words, self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence."

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel expresses a similar perspective in his book, *Human Being and Being Human*. He writes, "What is involved in authentic living is not only an intuition of meaning, but a sensitivity to demand....A person is one of whom demands can be made, who has the capacity to respond to what is required, not only to satisfy one's needs and desires...The most important experience in the life of every human being [is this]: something is asked of me.

Meaning is found in responding to the demand..."

From a Jewish perspective, then, the meaning-making choices by which we each define our life can realize their full potential only in relation to other souls, in community. The very first emotion experienced by Adam, our original human parent, was not meaning, but loneliness. Hence, God declared, "It is not good for a person to be alone." As it was in antiquity, so it remains. For us, however, community is more than an antidote to aloneness. It is an incubator of lasting relationships, personal growth and spiritual fulfillment. It is a place to nurture and be nurtured, comfort and be comforted, to live our values and transmit them to younger generations.

Our Temple is such a community, and as we increasingly become "a warm, welcoming synagogue family where each person matters," we enable each other "[to] find meaning and inspiration." As Professor Arnold Eisen puts it, in an incredibly complex, rapidly changing world, where we often feel adrift and isolated, "Judaism offers precisely what many in America have lost thanks to the freedoms and choices conferred by modernity: integral community and meaning profound enough to live by."

Victor Frankl's foundational premise, that each person has a unique task and a specific opportunity to implement it, also confirms the Torah's assertion that human beings are created in God's image, an unprecedented insight whose audacious implications cannot be overstated. To bear the Divine imprint means that human dignity is inherent and intrinsic, not contingent or conditional; it need

not be earned, explained or justified.

An ancient midrash compares God, *melech haolam, ruler of the universe, melech hamelachim, Sovereign of Sovereigns*, with human monarchs. When the latter had coins minted bearing their profile, all were identical. By contrast, when God impresses the Divine image on us, each one is different. Martin Buber quoted a Hasidic text: "Every person should know and consider the fact that you, in the particular way that you are made, are unique in the world, and no one like you has ever been. For if someone like you had already been, there would be no reason for you to [exist]."

Thus, as I hope you've heard me say before and will always remember: Never before and never again has there ever been or will there ever be another person exactly like you. *Never before and never again has there ever been or will there ever be another person exactly like you.* That message, that truth, is always vital to recall, but especially in times of loss, failure, and suffering, uncertainty, disappointment or disillusionment. To be created in God's image means we each possess a piece of the puzzle of human existence, and in our case, the puzzle of Jewish existence, that no one else can provide. If we fail to do so, it will forever be missing. When we identify and share that piece, we transform the universe!

To truly grasp, or even glimpse, the miraculous nature and unique possibilities each person embodies, consider how improbable human life was in the first place. Astronomer Fred Hoyle argues that the odds of the first single cell

life form emerging from Earth's primordial ooze were akin to those of a tornado assembling a jumbo jet out of a junkyard heap as it passes over. Evolutionary biologist Matthew Cobb points out that there are more single-celled organisms alive on Earth than there are Earth-like planets in the observable universe, that the number of single-celled organisms that have lived on this planet in the course of 3.8 billion years is beyond calculation, and that these organisms have interacted "gazillions" of times. Yet, Cobb claims, "We've never had a second instance of...that remarkable moment when one unicellular life form lodged inside another, forming something more complex."

Clearly, the likelihood of complicated life forms coming into being was epically miniscule. But assuming Descartes was right in observing, "I think, therefore I am," however incredible it may have been, bacteria, amino acids and, ultimately, human beings *did and do* exist. But even that does not account for the impossibly long odds of any *particular* person coming to be. Dr. Ali Binazir, a physician and philosopher, looked at the odds of one's parents meeting, given how many men and women there are on Earth and how many potential mates one's parents would have met in their first 25 years of life. Then he estimated the chances of them talking, meeting again, forming a long-term relationship, having kids together, and of the particular egg and sperm combining to make those kids. Then, going further back, he calculated the probability of all of one's ancestors successfully mating, and of all of the right sperm and eggs combining to make each of those ancestors. He writes, "It is the probability of 2 million

people getting together each day to play...with trillion-sided dice, [rolling them all,] and everyone coming up with the exact same number..." He concludes, "The odds that you exist at all are basically zero."

Binazir offered a second analogy. Imagine that a singular life preserver is floating in the world's oceans and there is exactly one turtle swimming somewhere underwater. He wrote, "The probability that you came about and exist today is the same as of that turtle sticking its head out [of the water] in the middle of that life preserver, on [the first] try." He estimated the odds at about one in 700 trillion, or one in 10 to the 2,685,100<sup>th</sup> power. He concluded, "A miracle is an event so unlikely as to be almost impossible. By that definition...you are a miracle. Now go forth and feel and act like the miracle you are."

On January 1, 1946, at 8:30PM, the 23 year old commanding officer of U.S. Navy minesweeper, YMS 129, in Alaska's Aleutian Islands, sat down to write a letter to his bride of 15 months. It began, "My Darling Sweetheart..." and announced the exciting news that his replacement had arrived that evening, so he would soon be released from active duty and return to her. Showering her with endearments and expressing his eagerness to start a family, he closed, "I love and adore you with all my heart, mind, and body, my darling. You're my whole world....Your adoring Hubby, your Bob." The young couple's first child, born January 6, 1947, stands before you, the miracle of me, facing, embracing, and boundlessly grateful for the miracle of you.

If describing one's particular existence as miraculous strikes you as too

poetical, metaphysical or theological, one alternative is "lucky." Columnist Carl Richards describes a friend who authored several best sellers. Asked what role luck played in his career, his friend replied, "Oh, luck has been everything. I can point to at least 10 occasions where pure, dumb luck landed me a huge break in my career....A guy I met on a plane, a random stranger, an introduction to a friend of a friend who happened to know a great book agent – that kind of luck."

I know what he means. If my father hadn't been assigned to that particular vessel... If we had invaded Japan rather than dropped the atomic bomb...If dad's successor had arrived a day earlier or later...If my parents hadn't felt like intimacy that night...if a different sperm reached the egg first - If, if, if, if- and countless other if's, neither I, nor our children or grandchildren would exist, nor would any of our family's future generations come to be. Yitzchak Tabenkin, a founder of Israel's kibbutz movement, put it beautifully: "New worlds are born within us, and they endow our evanescent efforts with the feeling of eternity".

Carl Richards suggests, "Practice saying out loud, 'I am very, very lucky'" and says that "by recognizing the role luck has played in our lives, we can go forward with just a little more humility and a little less ego." That strikes me as sound advice, though what some call luck, others would call "coincidence," and as Albert Einstein is said to have remarked, "Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous." So I'll stick with "miracle," and I'd recast his suggestion in Jewish terms, that we begin and end each day by saying, "*I am very, very*

*blessed,"* and identifying some reasons why. As our daily liturgy would have us recite every morning, *Modeh ani l'fanecha...* "I offer thanks to You, ever-living Sovereign, for restoring my soul to me in mercy." Heightened awareness of our superabundant good fortune will stimulate humility and gratitude, and reinforce our motivation to share our blessings, helping us become a miracle for others, and not for ourselves alone.

Mary Oliver wrote,

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean --

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down --

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

With your one wild and precious life?

As a new year begins, as each day dawns, as every sacred moment issues its unique invitation, the Creator of All proclaims, "Never before and never again has there ever been or will there ever be another person exactly like you...You are a miracle. *Go forth and feel and act like the miracle you are.*"

As a new year begins, as each day dawns, as every sacred moment beckons us toward meaning, the Holy One of Blessing insists, "You are part of things much larger, more significant, and more enduring than yourself: A sanctified community, a consecrated People, an eternal covenant with Me. *Be faithful to them.*"

As a new year begins, as each day dawns, as every sacred moment sends its personal summons, the Soul of the Universe gently, urgently inquires, "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

May God help us answer wisely and well.