

FIND THE JOY IN YOUR LIFE

I remember how I felt as if it happened yesterday! It was my senior year of high school at Marple Newton Sr. High in Broomall, PA. It was late spring and we were all getting hyped up about the upcoming senior prom. As we gathered in homeroom, awaiting the bell to begin first period, over the loud speaker came the announcement: “The theme song for our senior prom has been chosen.” Now there are all kinds of songs which define a generation or an era, and some make more sense than others. But I’ll never forget how weird, unsettled, and disappointed I felt when they announced the song: “All We Are Is Dust In The Wind” by Kansas.

Here are the lyrics:

I close my eyes, only for a moment, and the moment’s gone

All my dreams, pass before my eyes, a curiosity

Dust in the wind, all they are is dust in the wind.

Same old song, just a drop of water in an endless sea

All we do, crumbles to the ground, though we refuse to see

Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind

[Now] don't hang on, nothing lasts forever but the earth and sky

It slips away, and all your money won't another minute buy.

Dust in the wind, all we are is dust in the wind

Dust in the wind, everything is dust in the wind.

While the song was indeed a hit in 1978, couldn't they have chosen something a little more upbeat, hopeful, optimistic, or forward looking? All we are is dust in the wind? As we are about to begin our lives as young adults, as graduating seniors, with our whole lives ahead of us, all we are is dust in the wind? How depressing!

For years following, I used to joke about how inappropriate and unfulfilling was this selection, yet as the years wore on I began to

understand the wisdom, or perhaps the hidden message embedded in this song title.

In fact, one could even say that, the leit motif of this awesome day is exactly the same thought as expressed in this song of my senior prom. We will read it as part of the Yom Kippur K'dushah, a poetic "Pietistic" interpretation which has been woven into the fabric of the prayer since the Middle Ages. I know you know it, you must. It usually takes my breath away as I read it and if there is any single moment in the liturgy which grabs the attention of the congregation, it is surely this one. "Let us proclaim the awesome power of this day; it is awe-inspiring and full of dread. Who shall live and who shall die...? Who shall see ripe age and who shall not?"

This day, more than any other, forces us to deal with the problem of finitude, the irrational and unforeseeable contemplation of our own demise. How can it be that one minute we are fully sentient, conscious and feeling individuals, and then poof...we no longer exist, for can one

truly fathom his/her own demise? And yet as if the point is not plain enough for all to see, the liturgy makes it crystal clear; as it states:

“Man’s origin is dust and dust is his end.

Each of us is a shattered urn

Grass that must wither, a flower that will fade,

A shadow passing on, a cloud passing by,

A particle of dust floating on the wind

A dream soon forgotten.”

---There it is...”All we are is dust in the wind.”

So if this is the existential truth of all humanity, then what are we anyway? Is there meaning and purpose to existence as we know it?

Why should we do, think or believe anything if all we are is dust in the wind? Where is the joy in life if all we are is dust in the wind?

A compelling answer to this eternal question was offered in the wonderful movie *The Bucket List* starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. The bucket list is basically the list of things we might try to accomplish or experience before we kick the bucket. To that end, one of the most profound lines from that screenplay read: “It is up to you to find the joy in your life.” Finding joy in our lives is an antidote to our feeling like dust in the wind.

To find the joy in your life...What a concept? What an exceptional exhortation? But how? How does one go about finding the joy in his/her life?

There are 3 basic pathways which lead to discovering the joy in one’s life, and each one of them reflects core Jewish values. Listen carefully, and ask yourself after each one on this day introspection, and hopefully personal transformation, how you measure up. Are you travelling the path which can lead to true joy-true happiness?

The first pathway to finding joy in your life is by enjoying the material pleasures of God's world. We are told by our Rabbis that when our soul leaves this world, and is about ready to enter the next, we will be asked 4 key questions. One of these 4 questions will be, did you enjoy my world? Like a gracious host who only wants to know that her guests partook of all she prepared and found satisfaction in all that she made, so God only wishes to know that we too find pleasure in God's creations. That's the reason why there is a blessing for everything we see, taste, feel, smell or hear.

When one sees a rainbow, there's a blessing. When one smells a fragrance and spice, there is a blessing. When one tastes a delicious warm challah, there is a blessing. When one feels the warmth of the sun upon our back, or the sensation of relief when one tends to our natural instincts, there is a blessing. When one learns good news or even bad news, there is a blessing, why...simply because we are to

show our appreciation for all the wonders of God's world that are there for our benefit and enjoyment!

In other words, not only is dining on good food a joy and a pleasure, it is a mitzvah. Not only is imbibing fine wines in moderation a joy and a pleasure, it is a mitzvah. Not only is sharing intimate pleasures with the one we love a joy and a delight, it is a mitzvah. Especially on Shabbat!

When the Holy One asks you, did you partake of the pleasures of my world and express your gratitude...how will you answer?

The second pathway to seeking and finding the joy in our lives is through the doing of mitzvot. To perform a mitzvah is to sanctify our lives with K'dushah, a sensing of God's sacred presence in our lives. That is why the brachah states most clearly "asher k'dishanu b'mitzvotav", blessed is the Holy One who makes our lives holy by way of God's commandments, God's mitzvot. Whether it be an act of g'milut chasadim, a random act of kindness and compassion, or the

pursuit of justice and peace, or the fulfillment of a ritual mitzvah like kindling Sabbath lights, reciting Kiddush on erev Shabbat or dwelling in a Sukkah, each mitzvah opportunity draws us near to that which is High and Holy and in so doing brings us joy. A wonderful, true story teaches us how a small act of kindness can have an enormous impact on another's life. It is stories like this one which reminds us how much joy can be had by helping to ease the life of another.

THE CAB RIDE

Twenty years ago, I drove a cab for a living. When I arrived at 2:30 a.m., the building was dark except for a single light in a ground floor window. Under these circumstances, many drivers would just honk once or twice, wait a minute, and then drive away. But I had seen too many impoverished people who depended on taxis as their only means of transportation. Unless a situation smelled of danger, I always went to the door. This passenger might be someone who needs my assistance, I reasoned to myself. So I walked to the door and knocked.

“Just a minute,” answered a frail, elderly voice. I could hear something being dragged across the floor. After a long pause, the door opened. A small woman in her 80s stood before me. She was wearing a print dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, like somebody out of a 1940s movie. By her side was a small nylon suitcase. The apartment looked as if no one had lived in it for years. All the furniture was covered with sheets. There were no clocks on the walls, no knickknacks or utensils on the counters. In the corner was a cardboard box filled with photos and glassware. “Would you carry my bag out to the car?” She said. I took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to assist the woman. She took my arm and we walked slowly toward the curb. She kept thanking me for my kindness. “It’s nothing,” I told her. “I just try to treat my passengers the way I would want my mother treated.” “Oh you’re such a good boy,” she said. When we got in the cab, she gave me the address, and then asked, “Could you drive through downtown?” “It’s not the shortest way,” I answered quickly. “Oh, I don’t mind,” she said. “I’m in no hurry. I’m on my way to hospice.” I looked in the rear-

view mirror. Her eyes were glistening. "I don't have any family left," she continued. "The doctor says I don't have very long." I quietly reached over and shut off the meter. "What route would you like me to take?" I asked. For the next two hours, we drove through the city. She showed me the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. We drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds. She had me pull up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a young girl. Sometimes she'd ask me to slow down in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing. As the first hint of sun was creasing the horizon, she suddenly said, "I'm tired. Let's go now." We drove in silence to the address she had given me. It was a low building, like a small convalescent home, with a driveway that passed under a portico. Two orderlies came out to the cab as soon as we pulled up. They were solicitous and intent, watching her every move. They must have been expecting her. I opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the

door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair. “How much do I owe you?” She asked, reaching into her purse. “Nothing,” I said. “You have to make a living,” she answered. “There are other passengers,” I responded. Almost without thinking, I bent and gave her a hug. She held onto me tightly. “You gave an old woman a little moment of joy,” she said. “Thank you.” I squeezed her hand and then walked into the dim morning light. Behind me, a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of life. I didn’t pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly lost in thought. For the rest of the day, I could hardly talk. What if that woman had gotten an angry driver, or one who was impatient to end his shift? What if I had refused to take the run, or had honked once, then driven away? On a quick review, I don’t think that I have done anything more important in my life. We’re conditioned to think that our lives revolve around great moments, but great moments often catch us unaware – beautifully wrapped in what others may consider a small one.

PEOPLE MAY NOT REMEMBER EXACTLY WHAT YOU DID, OR WHAT YOU SAID, BUT- THEY WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER HOW YOU MADE THEM FEEL.

...and you will also remember the joy you felt bringing joy to others.

When was the last time you brought real joy to a total stranger?

Finally, I believe a real joy is experienced when one is able to accept the totality of life with all its ups and downs, successes and failures, joys and disappointments. When one is able to look back and see trials and tribulations overcome, when one is able to say “af al Pi chen”, despite the challenges, obstacles, and difficulties and sorrows, that life is and was worthwhile, meaningful and redemptive, then we are able to know the joy of perspective, the ability to see the big picture and still love it. That is to say: To see a majestic snow-capped mountain is to appreciate its awesome splendor and to know that it will disappear and love it, still.

Or as the familiar poem teaches:

When looking backwards or ahead

We see that victory lies not

At some high place along the way

But in having made the journey

Stage by stage, a sacred pilgrimage.

A tried and true road to finding the joy in your life is by gaining a “L’VAV chochma,” an understanding a discerning heart, by securing a heart of wisdom. Wisdom begets equilibrium of spirit, and a tranquil spirit begets a kind of joy which is most satisfying.

On this evening which ushers in the most reflective and possibly most transformative day of the year, let us consider the pathways we have traveled. Have they led to joy or have they led to discontent? Let us consider how in the year ahead we can chart a better course, a course which can lead to lasting joy and happiness.

I conclude with the following tale. The wedding was over and the last guest had left the now empty hall where just minutes before the most beautiful bride in the world had just experienced the best day of her life.

The janitor all alone began to sweep up the rose petals strewn about the aisle which led to the chuppah. Lost in a reverie he thought to himself, what a waste! These beautiful rose colored petals once so vibrant with color, now began to wrinkle and turn brown around the edges.

Just then he heard a voice. He couldn't believe his ears. The petals began to speak. How dare you call our lives a waste! For a brief but grand moment it was our purpose to bring joy to a bride on the most important day of her life. We did what we were supposed to do and in so doing we know the blessed feeling of utmost joy. What is a life anyway, yours or mine or anybody's but a reason to bring joy to others and in doing so finding the joy in one's own life.

Do not grieve for me or call my life a waste; I fulfilled my purpose, I brought joy to others, and I found joy and happiness through and through.

Just then the janitor shook his head, smiled and a little wiser, returned to sweeping the hall.

Even petals strewn on the floor or dust in the wind have purpose and meaning when we can find the intrinsic joy of being of service to others.

So my friends we are indeed more than just dust in the wind or petals strewn upon the floor. We are human beings created in the image and likeness of God.

On this eve of the first day of the New Year 5785, may we look within and there may we find the joy we have always sought. By enjoying the pleasures of God's world, through the performance of mitzvot, and by accepting the totality and life, both the good and bad, we find the joy we seek. For in our soul searching may we come to

know the joy of knowing God, for in the search itself is abundant happiness as it states. “Joyful is the heart which seeks to know the Lord.” May all those who travel these pathways find the joy in their lives and let us say, Amen.