

A little boy was waiting on his mother to come out of a store. As he waited, he was approached by a man who asked, "Son, can you tell me how to get to the post office?" The little boy replied, "Sure, just go straight down the street a couple of blocks and turn to your right." The man thanked the boy kindly and said, "I'm the new preacher in town, and I'd like for you to come to services on Sunday, I'll show you how to get to heaven." The little boy replied with a chuckle, "Awww, come on; you don't even know how to get to the post office."

As Jews we are obligated to bring heaven down to earth everyday so that we can find heaven even at the post office. On I-71 there are signs stating that hell is real and asking, where would you spend eternity if you died right now? These are not Jewish signs. We reject such fear tactics as incentive for how to live. The salvation of our lives is born out of our love for G-d, our love of and reverence for life and our sense of responsibility for how we live in this world.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us that it is absurd for anyone to be preoccupied with matters of what happens after we die if we are not totally preoccupied with how we live in this world. We do not live to avoid burning in hell or to be rewarded in heaven. We are to live the best ethical and moral lives we can because that is what G-d wants us to do with our lives. Short and simple.

Edward Rothstein wrote in a recent book review: "We want to be reassured that there is something progressive about human understanding. We want to feel that in a final confrontation with mortality, something profound takes place. When the end is near, we want there to be a sign of this, some proof of accumulated insight."

Our rabbis insisted that a person must be learning to the very last breath one takes. They were not simply referring to Torah study; but learning about life and one's place and purpose in G-d's universe. We are told that we should always be like children in our enthusiasm and excitement to grow and learn. The Talmud says that to be advanced in days only refers to wisdom, spiritual awareness and ethical consciousness. The book of Ecclesiastes, Kohelet, concludes by reminding us that our exclusive concern should be to live our lives to the very best of our ability as G-d wants us to. Hillel taught that we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves; that the rest is commentary and we are to go and study and then live by what we learn. In light of such teachings, how can anyone feel as if he or she has no purpose in life? How can anyone be ever bored given the obligations and responsibilities we have.

D.H. Lawrence wrote that all people dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night wake to find that all was fantasy. But the dreamers of the day may act their dreams with open eyes to make them real." What do we dream of? For Jews this is a critical question seeing that we are the children of dreamers. Abraham dreamt and a covenant with G-d was established, Jacob dreamt and heaven and earth were connected; he dreamt again and

he became Israel. Joseph dreamt and interpreted dreams resulting in G-d's plan being fulfilled.

What do we dream of? Do we dream of justice and peace? Do we dream for there to be no hunger or homelessness? Do we dream of doing something to make the world better, to relieve suffering and pain? Do we dream for our children to live ethical and moral lives and for our children to be kind and honest people? Do we dream of the Jewish people's future? Do we dream of Israel being safe and secure and at peace? What do you and I dream of? What do our children and grandchildren dream of?

The Kotzker Rebbe emphasized that what we are to be concerned with is our inner work. What we accomplish within is what determines qualitatively how we experience what happens externally. Of course, it is just the opposite for most of us. We preoccupy ourselves with the externalities of life and ignore our inner worlds. Silence—so important to cultivating our inner selves—is minimally uncomfortable to most of us and even threatening to some. Our attention spans—a function of our inner selves—continue to diminish and our focus on material matters increases.

What do we do with our discretionary time? Remember Tevye singing what he would do if he were rich? He would study, daven and do tzedakah. What do those of us who have discretionary time do? Are we taking classes at Raymond Walter or UC, are we taking Jewish adult study classes including right here at Adath Israel? Are we doing elder hostels, developing hobbies, pursuing art and culture? Are we walking in the woods, enjoying sunrises and sunsets, reading books and attending lectures? Are we volunteering and getting involved in our community? Are we meditating and reflecting on our lives? How many of us have an active prayer life—be at shul, at home or wherever we are so moved? How many of us are cultivating our inner worlds?

How can we have profound lives if we continue to spend so much time in front of the television, not reading, spending so much time watching and playing sports and shopping; and talking about, as Tracy Chapman would say, “things?” How can we take ourselves seriously yet alone live serious lives if we continue to watch reality shows and American Idol with the interest and devotion that we do? If we were to sing if “I were a rich man or woman,” what would our songs be like?

Instead of having our inner faith and fortitude govern how we deal with the external world, we allow fears and insecurities created by the external world rule the day. As the Kotzker Rebbe observed, nothing external can purchase inner fulfillment, peace and richness of spirit no matter how frantically and desperately human beings try. Nothing we do externally can eliminate the fear, for example, of terrorism as is so painfully clear. Anyone with a phobia of any kind knows this to be true. To continue cultivating the climate of fear in this country will in turn continue to poison our inner selves with xenophobia and hate and compromise if not negate the values, principles and rights that Americans have cherished and honored from the very beginnings of our country.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis shares that once in a while in a crisis situation, when one has to face the gray walls of a hospital or a mortuary or a divorce court, the boredom ends, the strategies of evasion crumble, and the question comes out in the form of a scream: “Where is the life I have lost while living?”

The philosopher and survivor of the Shoah, Emanuel Levinas, insisted that we become fully human, in the serious, philosophical sense of the word, only when we become aware of suffering. Karen Armstrong asserts that “not until a person quits denying the pain and suffering in our world and feel these deeply, can one be empathic and feel the pain of another and then be able to bring comfort and solace.” The ancients knew this. They knew that resentment, hatred, feelings of revenge and vindictiveness not only keep us from being compassionate but keep us from being human in terms of feeling the pain of others and being forgiving. This is why we have so many commandments, mitzvot, warning us about such thoughts and feelings and the subsequent behavior they lead to.

In other words, when we do not use our G-d given ability to be empathic then we are not fulfilling our purpose for being alive. When we miss an opportunity to feel how someone else feels, we are failing G-d. When we fail G-d we are not living insightful and profound lives. Our prophets knew and understood the consequences of not being empathic individuals and sustaining an empathic society. What did Isaiah just cry out to us in the haftarah as to what real living is about, what G-d wants of us? “To unlock the shackles of evil, to loosen the binds of the yoke, to send forth crushed souls to freedom, to tear every yoke in two! To give our food to the hungry, to bring the poor wanderer home, when you see the naked, clothe them, when you see your own flesh and blood, do not turn aside!” Isaiah is telling us what it is to live with meaning, what it is to live profoundly. For how many more thousands of years are we going to have to hear these same words before creating the society these words envision?

Rabbi Abraham ben Shmuel HaLevi Hasdai reminds us that light is not recognized except through darkness. To appreciate a better future, we have to appreciate the darkness that inhabits all of our lives. What do Jews do, we used to ask, when it is dark? We turn on a light. Judaism still requires that of us but not just a light to dispel Jewish darkness or our own personal darkness. Judaism was, is and always will be concerned with the darkness in our world. We always will be commanded to be a light unto the entire world not just to ourselves or to fellow Jews. When the darkness of someone else’s life does not touch me, I am no longer alive in any ultimate sense; I am not fulfilling my purpose being here.

Recently, Eli Weisel and George Clooney went before the United Nations Security Council. They pleaded with them—especially the United States—to act now and definitively to stop the genocide in Darfur before it is too late. Eli Weisel told the Security Council that if they fail they will have to live with their guilt forever just as those who failed during the Holocaust. How can anyone regard one’s life as having purpose and meaning who ignores what is going on in Darfur—individuals like us and especially, people in power? We must write and call our representatives in Congress, attend rallies and programs and write letters to our newspapers. We must show our

children what it is to be a Jew and stand up against injustice and defend the down trodden and what it is to fight to save lives. And, for those in positions of influence, those who live in the chambers and hallways of power and real politic, we Jews know better than anyone that real politic is not profound and insightful living; it is almost always perverse and deathly.

We are told as Jews that we are to be part of history. As Jews we are commanded to weigh in on the global drama. We cannot remain indifferent, Jews are not neutral on anything yet alone what human beings do and do not do in response to what is happening in our world. That is why many Jewish organizations are so involved with what is going on in Darfur even though to date not enough Jews are. This is why Jews are to be concerned with the supply of medications to South Africa to treat AIDS and with the issues that in America--the wealthiest country in the history of humankind--tens and tens of millions of Americans do not have health insurance and in this rich country of ours millions of children go to school hungry everyday. These friends are profound concerns that when addressed lead to profound lives.

We are to be very concerned with how we respond to things that happen in our world such as hurricanes, earthquakes and diseases. We are not to be overly concerned with and distracted by the question as to why such things happen. Judaism tells us that history is to be one of repair and healing, of tikkun, and that we are to be active participants in and contributors to tikkun Olam. This is our purpose, this is why we are here. This is how something profound takes place before we die. This is why it is absurd to feel as if we do not have purpose in our lives or to ever, ever to be bored. Everyone is making history in G-d's history book. What history we make with our lives depends on us.

A beautiful and pleading Midrash tells us that the Holy One said to Israel: "My children, have I deprived you in any way? What do I want from you? I only ask that you should love each other and treat each other with dignity and stand in awe of every person being equal parts of the world I have given you." Our purpose being alive is to put a few pieces of our shattered world back together during our lifetime. No one is obligated to do it all; we are all obligated to do what we can. Our prophet Micah tells us clearly, beyond any misunderstanding, what G-d wants of us: "It has been told to you O mortal, what is good and what the Eternal requires of you—Only this—to do justly, love kindness and walk humbly with your G-d."

G-d does not require us to be rich and famous or stylish and physically attractive; G-d does not require us to be a good athlete, cool or popular. G-d also does not require us to be triumphant over and better than others.

G-d does not require us to seek revenge and punishment, G-d does not require us to be fearful and hateful. G-d does require us to live profound lives and not to waste our lives. G-d requires us to be just, kind and humble.

Our Torah, prophets and rabbis knew as I am confident that each of us does on this Yom Kippur that this is truly the way not just to find the post office but bring Heaven into it.

Hell is not some other place; hell is any place in our world in need of a little bit of Heaven and we have the opportunity to make it happen and we do not.

My uncle, Rabbi Aaron Wise, alav HaShalom, wrote the following poem, "Is There Time Enough, O G-d?"

"The people who walk in darkness
Have seen a great light!"
We who walk in darkness
And stumble through the night
Cry out: Break dawn, break day,
Dissolve, O Sun, the ice-jams
Of our frozen hearts.
Leash mad dogs
Of bitterness and hate;
Snap barbed wire
Sundering us from fellowman;
Cure intolerable pain
Of war and human strife.

Is there time enough, O G-d?
What hours, minutes, seconds wait
To tick before the end,
The end of hope, the end of Man?

"Behold, I take from you
Your heart of stone
And give you in its place
A heart of flesh."

Teach us, G-d, this transplant-art
In surgery of soul:
"Hearts of flesh for hearts of stone!"
Transmuting dross, transforming dregs,
Making fractured, broken lives
Whole and new again.

Give us medicine for dis-ease of soul
Heart failure, brain-failure, paralysis of will.
Liberate us from chains of passion,
Handcuffs of ignorance,
Beartrap of poverty,
Quicksand of despair.

Wisdom do we seek from You.
Will you spin our dreams around the sun?