

Living With Sacred Purpose

In 2009, palliative nurse turned author and speaker Bronnie Ware, wrote a blog post entitled "Regrets of the Dying." By 2012, the blog post had been read by eight million people across the globe, and was eventually turned into a book which has at this point been translated into 27 languages. You may have come across it by now. Writing of her intimate journey with these people who chose to die at home, Ware describes five common themes that were expressed by each of her patients as they made their journey from one world to another.

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.

"This was the most common regret of all. When people realize that their life is almost over and look back clearly on it, it is easy to see how many dreams have gone unfulfilled. Most people had not honored even a half of their dreams and had to die knowing that it was due to choices they had made, or not made..."

2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.

She wrote, "This came from every male patient that I nursed. They missed their children's youth and their partner's companionship. Women also spoke of this regret. But as most were from an older generation, many of the female patients had not been breadwinners. All of the men I nursed deeply regretted spending so much of their lives on the treadmill of a work existence..."

3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.

"Many people suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others. As a result, they settled for a mediocre existence and never became who they were truly capable of becoming. Many developed illnesses relating to the bitterness and resentment they carried as a result...."

4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.

"Often they would not truly realize the full benefits of old friends until their dying weeks and it was not always possible to track them down. Many had become so caught up in their own lives that they had let golden friendships slip by over the years. There were many deep regrets about not giving friendships the time and effort that they deserved. Everyone misses their friends when they are dying..."

5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

"This is a surprisingly common one. Many did not realize until the end that happiness is a choice. They had stayed stuck in old patterns and habits. The so-called 'comfort' of familiarity overflowed into their emotions, as well as their physical lives. Fear of change had them pretending to others, and to themselves, that they were content. When deep within, they longed to laugh properly and have silliness in their life again..."

On Yom Kippur we are reminded to face our mortality. In some senses many of us have been doing this for a number of months at this point, with the anxiety of Covid-19 ever present, with illness and death seeming to lurk around every corner. Indeed, I am speaking to you in this way, on this day, alone in our sanctuary, feeling your energy from afar, because we are afraid of what might happen, to any one of us, should we gather in person. We know that someone could get ill. We know that someone could die. The messages of mortality found in this particular day, during this particular moment, are indeed quite real and tangible as we gather in this strange way, during this strange time.

But what **are we doing** with this awareness? That is the question of the hour. As we look back at this past year, as we take time to examine our lives up to this point, how many of us can say, with confidence, that we have no regrets? Even more than that, how many of us can say that we are clear about our purpose in life, about what we are meant to do in this world? Because if we can answer **that** question on this most sacred evening, if we can keep **that frame of reference** in front of us each and every day- then perhaps our regrets will indeed be few and far between.

Rabbi Ed. Feinstein, explains that there is a deep significance in the fact that the first question in the Torah, asked from God to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is, "Ayeka," where are you?" He writes:

If you don't live on purpose, you live by accident. And most people, they live by accident. They let life shape them, they let life push them around. Expectations, demands, roles that they play have been given to them invisibly- they've never accepted them. And what happens is that one day late in life you wake up to discover that you've missed it all. You've missed the dream that you pursued, you've missed the relationships that you wished to deepen, and you miss life itself. Live by accident and you live randomly. Live on purpose and you arrive at the place that you want to live. You arrive at a place of purpose and equanimity, of peace and wholeness- Ayekah, where are you and where are you going?¹

¹ **Rabbi Ed Feinstein, Ayeka project 5777**

Where are you? And where are you going? With fears of the angel of death lurking around every corner these days -- God-willing held off by masks, social distancing, disinfectant sprays, and Clorox wipes -- have we stopped to ask ourselves why are we fighting so desperately to live? Because if we can answer that question, and then **live accordingly**, paying more than lip service to our supposed priorities, then perhaps we will have learned something from this months-long Yom Kippur-like no-end-in-sight experience that we have been enduring. Then, perhaps, when it is all over, we will be able to walk back into our normal world, *changed for the better, by living purposefully*, intentionally, clear on our values and our priorities, with no regrets.

According to our sages, our ancestor Abraham lived such a life. In Genesis 24 we are told that:

Abraham was old, *advanced in years*, *v'Adonai berakh et Avraham b'kol-* and the Lord blessed Abraham in all things. **Genesis 24:1**

Close readers of text, the rabbis of old did not like redundancies and wondered why the text said both that Abraham was old, and also "advanced in years," more literally- *coming along in days*. Their explanation? Abraham had reached that point of his life, "with all of his days," when not one day was wasted, not one day was empty, not one day failed to produce an

important insight.² Abraham lived with intention, with purpose, with direction.

The Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, a Hasidic rabbi living in 19th century Poland, framed the search for meaning and purpose as a very individualized experience. He taught that each one of us has been given specific reasons for being on this earth. Each one of us has a particular type of sacred healing that we are to bring to this world. A sacred healing and purpose that was designed by God, and built into the very Torah that we received on Sinai. The Sefat Emet explained that:

"..Each of us has a portion in the Torah. That is why it is called Torah Lishmah; (study for its own sake) study that is aimed at discovering the portion of our soul (that is found in) Torah....

Each and every one of us, said the Sefat Emet, has a particular tikkun, type of sacred "fixing" about which we are to be engaged at all times...and each and every one of us has our own unique path to find the portion of life that belongs to us alone."³

Think about this for a minute. Each one of us has our own, individual path. A path which can be revealed to us by engaging with Torah, with our faith, with our values, with our teachings, our traditions, and with God. It is a path that is unique to us alone. It is a path that takes study, learning, and an

² Itturei Torah

³ Rabbi Jonathan Slater, translation, Sefat Emet on Gen. 1:20

open heart and mind to reveal. But it is a path that has been there for us all along. And each time we endeavor to learn, and each time we used the wisdom of our Judaism to guide our lives, we have the opportunity to discover just exactly what that unique purpose might be and how we might each bring tikkun, healing, into our lives, into the lives of another, and into a world that is in desperate need of healing.

So , what is **your** purpose in life? What is your personal *tikkun*, the way that you might be able to bring healing and wholeness into our world? What is your Torah, not in terms of the wisdom you have to share, but in terms of the sacred portion of your soul, created by God for you alone, that is yours to share?

Can we ever know the answers to these questions with certainty? Of course not. And it is true, that if we take these questions too far, they can lead us to fanatical places. But, considering these larger questions in a reasoned way reminds us that we **can** live with intention, we **can** live with purpose, we **can** live with curiosity and a realization that sometimes our purpose will take us to unexpected places.

Don't take it from me, take it from Oprah Winfrey, who once said this about discovering our purpose, our unique calling:

"I've come to believe that each of us has a personal calling that's as unique as a fingerprint – and that the best way to succeed is to discover what you love and then find a way to offer it to others in the form of service, working hard, and also allowing the energy of the universe to lead you."

Can we be "called" to more than one thing? Of course. Can we have more than one purpose in life, or can that purpose change over time? I believe the answer to each of these questions is yes; with the caveat that our purpose continues to be rooted in our deepest, and most cherished values. Values that are hopefully guided and informed by the deep wisdom of our tradition, of our heritage, of our people.

But in order to live with purpose, in order to discover our "callings," we need to know what we believe. Like those who spoke as a part of the 1950's radio program "This I Believe," hosted by Edward R. Murrow, we need to be willing to identify what we believe to be sacred and true, in order to live each day with clarity.

When I was much younger, I once scribbled on a scrap of paper the following words: *Jack Be Nimble, Jack Be Jack- Whatever You do- be yourself!* I have no idea how old I was- maybe 9 or 10. I have no idea why I wrote down those words. But I do remember that this little scrap piece of paper was placed into a frame for everyone to see- a sign of the importance of that message that I had somehow intuited, or needed to remind myself at a very young age. As young children, most have no problem being themselves. Most have no problem living with “purpose” and marching to the beat of their own drummer. Enter adolescence, followed by young adulthood, parenthood, careers, love, loss, retirement, and sometimes, somewhere along the way, we get lost.

Ayeka? Where are you? What are you meant to be doing with your life? Are you living with purpose? Are you living with intention? Are you being true to yourself or are you spending all too much of your life trying to be like someone else? Do you have many regrets and is it too late to do something about them? Is it too late to return to the person that you want to be, the person that you were meant to be?

Life can be filled with distractions, but we are living through a clarifying moment in time. And though all of us wish that were not the case, my prayer is that each of us is wise enough to take advantage of the moment.

As Rabbi Nachman of Breslov once prayed:

Dear God, as we age- as hours turn to days, days to weeks, weeks to months, and months to years- let none of our time be wasted or lost.

Let each of us use our lives to the fullest, to become the people we were meant to be.

Tonight we pray to be given a clean slate, to be inscribed and sealed in the book of Life. May we remember to write our own story with clarity, with purpose, and with intention as we are blessed to enter into a New Year together. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah.*