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### INJECTING MEANING

Every year I look out to this amazing congregation and I am gratified that I know so much about your journey, your family, your blessings and your struggles. With the dawn of social media so many people are adept at putting out there an image of what they want people to believe, the mask that so many New Yorkers don. But here, in our sacred praying place, honesty can prevail. We worry, and I'm not yet talking about Israel and anti-Semitism as I will on Yom Kippur. Closer to home, I know that you have weathered surgery, you have fears of getting older, I am aware of some of the mental, physical and emotional struggles of a child or a member of your family, the parent living in Florida declining in health with escalating needs that you must attend to. You pray that your sister's In Vitro treatments will help them attain their dreams and that your impending MRI will show a benign tumor. You worry that you might outlive your money and once again, you worry about your kids.

Oy do we worry. Will they get in to this school or that, will they get out of our apartment eventually? All these goals seem harder to obtain these days and therefore cause them and their parents increased angina.

There is so much weighing on us in our own lives and in our increasingly destabilized world. Yet, with all of these concerns, we are here, we are alive, we persevere. We try to remain hopeful and gratified. Reminds me of the older gentleman who meets his rabbi in Florida, "How are you Harry?"

"Not so good Rabbi. I had my hip replaced, even with a hearing aid I don't hear so good. With my cataracts I can barely see."

"But, thank God I can still drive!"

Thank God. That's what I feel as I stand before you beginning my 25<sup>th</sup> year as your rabbi. Overwhelming gratitude.

Some sixty years ago a top doctor at Boston Children's Hospital said that this Robert with his, what they called, CP, "He may not ever walk and he may not develop cerebrally." You can imagine how my parents felt at that moment. Well, I did manage to struggle to my feet when I was about eighteen months old and I remember going to Arnold's Shoe Store in downtown Springfield, Massachusetts and have to purchase either two pairs of shoes or order correctives because my feet were two and a half to three sizes different and they grew together within a half size.

Some eight years later I found myself in speech therapy, lots of speech therapy and all of sudden *Fworada* became *Florida*, without which I certainly wouldn't be here.

How did I get from there to here? I am amazed! So if my *shehecheyanu* sounds heartfelt you know why I do feel so indebted to God.

Wouldn't it be great, if we could sustain a state of gratitude? Walk around feeling blessed most of the time? Alas, however those stunning moments are difficult to sustain. Real life takes us back to our pains, our worries, our very mortality.

A man sits in a rabbi's study. He speaks haltingly: two weeks ago, for the first time in my life I went to the funeral of a man my own age. I didn't know him well, but we worked together, had kids about the same age. He died suddenly over the weekend. A bunch of us went to the funeral each of us thinking: it could just as easily have been me. That was two weeks ago. They have already replaced him at the office. I hear his wife is moving out of state to live with her parents. Two weeks ago he was working fifty feet away from me and now it's as if he never existed. It's like a rock falling into a pool of water. For a few seconds it makes ripples in the water and then the water is the same as it was before, but the rock isn't there anymore. Rabbi .... "I couldn't stop thinking that one day it could happen to me and a few days later I'll be forgotten as if I had never lived. Shouldn't a man's life be more than that?"

These are two of our gravest fears: that the precious gift of life could be ripped away from us at any instant and even worse that the world will go on just as before, and that maybe we will be forgotten by the very people we want to cherish us, the very people we want to inspire, people we live for, and who constitute living testimony that we were here and made some difference.

For all these reasons our patriarch Abraham unsettles us each and every Rosh Hashanah. While he seeks to prove that he is worthy of being the patriarch of our people by heeding God's command, he fails to show equal concerns for the people he cares about most. He takes Isaac up the mountain with nary a word to his beloved wife left behind. And when Isaac suddenly realizes something is amiss he says, "Avi, my father, I see the fire and the wood but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" "God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering my son."

Isaac now realizes what is about to happen. Abraham is struggling on the ethereal plain of conflicting duty, but does he take the time to tell his son how much he cares about him, how agonized he is, how he is torn between love of God and love of child.

These holy days compel us to wrestle with what is truly important. We need to ask ourselves: do we have core values, a moral standard we will not abandon? And do we communicate them to the people we need to know them; do our loved ones know who we are at the core of our being? Do they know how much they mean to us because we show them every day?

Columnist David Brooks wrote a column for high school graduates a few years ago focused on the ways our society is messed up. The system is structured to pay little heed to matters that have a huge impact on happiness and is obsessed with the decisions that have a marginal impact on happiness. There are guidance offices to help people in every phase of selecting a college. There are business schools offering career placement services.

But the most important decisions that any of us can make, Brooks contends, concerns relationships, among them whom we marry. Yet there are no courses about how do we choose a spouse. Crucial is our ability to make and keep friends. Yet, there's no curriculum for that. Perhaps, the most important skill a person can possess, as these holy days make abundantly clear, is the ability to control one's impulses.

Brooks could not be more right. In that regard can we dare hope that the disgraceful behavior of NFL players like Ray Rice and Adrian Peterson will underscore that beating up your spouse, child abuse, incest and rape are crimes that must be prosecuted. Too many people in our midst cannot control their frustrations and antipathy to self and take it out on people they purport to love. According to the Center for Disease Control, "1 in 3 women-over 42 million women-have experienced physical violence by an intimate partner." This is happening everywhere and sadly to some of you. We want to help even the perpetrator but only after they stop terrorizing family members. We also have to convince victims that they cannot rationalize being brutalized, that they are created in God's image and must be treated with that much respect.

We could dream that pop artists listened to by so many of our kids would stop writing and performing lyrics like Rihanna's, "I like the way it hurts." If you do, Rihanna, you should stop publicizing that fact for your own self-respect and out of regard for others who find themselves or who might find themselves in destructive, dangerous relationships.

Psychologist Carl Jung in his book *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* made this remarkable observation:

*Among all my patients in the second half of life there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life.*

What does that mean, a religious outlook on life? For some of us Judaism is a series of lovely experience. We light Shabbat candles, sing at the Seder table, celebrate Chanukah with family, Brit Milah, Bat Mitzvah, Chuppah. Yet as wonderful and significant as each of these events are, we may not emerge with the religious outlook which informs the entirety of our lives.

Comedian Billy Crystal had an experience which dramatizes this:

At his synagogue there was a moment in every Bar Mitzvah service where the light dimmed, heavenly organ music played and the rabbi solemnly called the Bar Mitzvah boy over. As the music reached a crescendo the rabbi leaned over and whispered some sacred words to the chosen one and the thirteen year old's eyes would well up in tears, bound into the congregation, hug his parents and grandparents and return to the bimah. It was the dramatic conclusion to the service, and soon we would all be eating stuffed cabbage and greeting relatives who would spit Swedish meatballs on the boy's mohair suit as they handed him a Jewish war bond.

My day arrived, March 25, 1961 arrived. Even though I was standing on an apple crate so I could be seen, a very sturdy apple crate as I was wider than I was tall, after the Torah was dressed and put back into the ark, the rabbi motioned me over. The music started, my heart began pounding. He put his learned, ancient hands on my shoulders, leaned in close, and with that herring and pickle breath of his he whispered the words I was sure had come from God's lips to my ears:

"Count to ten, go into the congregation, kiss your parents and come back on the bimah."

"That's it?" I whispered hoarsely.

"That's it and I expect you to be in confirmation class Monday."

At Rodeph Sholom no one says "that's it!" Our life-cycle events truly do inspire, but by themselves they too will not provide the roadmap that Judaism absolutely provides.

So what is the key to a life well lived, a religious outlook on life.

Psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl, whom I taught in our Adult Ed series this past year, gave us great insight in his seminal book, *Man's Search for Meaning*. Meaning is crucial to life, but meaning is not plucked from a tree, simply extracted from life. We have to inject meaning in every setting and circumstance.

Doctor Frankl writes from inside Auschwitz, seemingly the most hopeless spot in human history, but not for Frankl. He writes: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the man who walked through huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offered sufficient proof that anything can be taken away from us, but one thing—the freedom to choose how we respond to life's circumstance."

Investing meaning in life involves transcending obsession with self—how we feel, how we look, how we appear to others—and focuses on others who need you. On those inhumane marches from Auschwitz barricades to the work site, Frankl writes:

"The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles.

....my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look.

I did not know whether my wife was alive, and I had no means of finding out. There was no need for me to know; nothing could touch the strength of my love, my thoughts, and the image of my beloved."

She gave his life an abiding purpose.

I was moved and stunned this summer during those terrible, terrible months in Israel, about which we'll talk more on Yom Kippur, the war sparked by the brutal murder of three boys, Gilad Shaar, Eyal Yifrach, Naftali Frankl, on the West Bank. Soon after that a sixteen year old Palestinian youth by the name of Mohammed Abu Khdeir was shockingly burned alive by Jewish extremists. So consumed by grief over the death of her son, Rachel Frankl picked up the phone and called Mohammed's family and was quoted as saying, "It is difficult for me to describe how distressed we are by the outrage committed in the shedding of innocent blood in defiance of our morality and of our Torah."

That is so amazing. Rachel Frankl underscores what these holy days are about. We can retreat into anger and self-pity, and absolutely no one would blame this grief-stricken mother for doing so. Or we can rise to our greatness, use our pain to address the suffering of others.

All of them had to overcome so much pain and hurt to reach beyond themselves. What about us? Can you overcome your hurt, your stubborn insistence that you are right to rise to your greatness, to subvert the impulse to hurt others time and time again, to reconnect with the estranged, to stop repeating the same sin over and over again?

What is asked of us this day is to really feel what a gift your life is, to understand that time is short, the task is urgent, that you have to make the change now. What is also asked of you today is to savor the stunning blessings we possess and to become fully aware of the utter despair evidenced by many people all around us.

Awareness of the inequities of life and the response to it are keys to our Social Justice program here at Rodeph Sholom and key to our religious outlook on life.

I was struck by a recent survey which claims that 76% of all people do not believe that life will be better for our children than it is for us. We can be very troubled by that number, but I don't concur. I think that life can be better for them if what we mean by better is living up to their potential as people and as Jews, if better means that they prioritize relationships, if they resolve to deliver blessings, if they are

able to look in the mirror and are proud of the image they see in return, if better means making life a little bit better for someone else as well.

Sometimes our millennials get a very bad rap. They are sometimes called narcissistic, self-absorbed, but I am here to sing their praises. *The New York Times* data shows that millennials appear to be more interested in living lives defined by meaning. Reportedly, they are less focused on financial success than they are on making a difference. Kids we all know often work and volunteer in sectors doing amazing things, they Teach for America, they travel all over the world to lend their skills to make the world more fair, they flock to Birthright, not to get an inexpensive trip but because they want to connect to the miracle that is Israel and Jewish life. They want to grapple with their identity to figure out not whether they are Jews but how to be Jews.

Something very exciting is happening in our congregation in partnership with Rabbi Gewirtz's TBJ. Rabbi Spratt and their associate rabbi have put together an exciting post-college organization. Already there is a board comprised of young people from both congregations and they're really into it. Do you know what they named themselves: *Tribe*. Tribe, they're part of us. There's already a mailing list, if you can still call it that of 900 young people. Their first service was standing room only; over 200 people showed up a couple of Friday nights ago. There will be a number of activities, but the core of what they will do is a monthly prayer service followed by social program.

Prayer—not in the synagogue, but in a downtown site, all the while affirming their connection and their values, as they say *Hineni*, I am here, as a vital link to the Jewish future.

How uplifting that is, and how uplifted we can be this day by investing life with meaning, by believing we are worthy of love, by forgiving those who hurt us when forgiveness is sought and earned, by resolving not to turn our backs on those who are crying out in need.

A *New Yorker* cartoon once had a man bowing piously before the Eternal One. Looking heavenward he raised his fist and proclaimed, "I asked you in the nicest possible way to make me a better person but apparently you could not be bothered."

You've got to make the first move.

In conclusion, Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of the time he was sitting on the beach during the summer watching two children hard at work building a sandcastle with gates, towers, moats, the whole business. Just as they were nearly finishing their elaborate project a wave came along and knocked it down.

Kushner goes on, "I expected the children to burst into tears, devastated about what had happened to all their hard work. But they totally surprised me. Instead they got up, began to laugh, ran up the shore and sat down to build another sand castle."

We build a lot of sandcastles and watch some of them come crashing down. We carefully plan our life and it doesn't exactly work out the way we planned. But, if we live with a religious outlook we will care less about the things that don't really matter. We can pick our self up, put our hand in the hand of another and deliver blessing.

I wish you a meaningful year.

Amen.