

Purpose

There is the story of a man who was very worried about his elderly mother. She was miserable all the time. “You don’t call. You don’t write. I’m just so alone. Even though I never listened to a thing your father said, I miss the sound of his droning on.” Her son pondered this, and came up with a solution. He went into a pet shop looking for a parrot. There he found a beautiful bird in a cage, so he asked, “How much is the parrot?” “\$10,000,” said the proprietor. The man was shocked, “\$10,000! Why so much?” “This not just any parrot, it used to belong to a professor of Bible. This bird can quote the entire Torah by heart. Show him Shloymi.” Sure enough, the parrot started reciting the 10 commandments. “I’ll take it,” said the man. “Please deliver it to my mother.” A week later he calls his mother to see how she is doing. “I’m miserable. It is so quiet here. You don’t call. You don’t write. I’m so alone. But the chicken you sent sure was delicious.”

Molly Jong-Fast asserts that “we suffer two great inheritances of the Jewish people: irritable bowel syndrome and guilt.” And, of course, one of the gurus of Jewish motivation, Woody Allen, offered this illustration of his Jewish identity in childhood: “When we played softball, I’d steal second base, feel guilty and go back.”

While minimal in the mindset of Jews from Russia, Argentina, and Israel, “Jewish guilt” is one of the mainstays of the American Jewish ethos. And it’s used in a dizzying array of justifications for our own behaviors – why some of us are forever dieting, while inspiring others to overeat; why we over-indulge our children or helicopter-parent them; why we tidy up the apartment before the housecleaning service arrives, and why we struggle to admit full-bodied joy into our life.

Simmering beneath the surface of the American Jewish psyche is the sense that suffering is definitional, and that the other shoe will surely drop (if it isn’t stolen first).

The trouble is, guilt is a really terrible motivator. It is important to note that nearly 90% of New Year’s resolutions (Jewish or secular) or similar declarations of change, will fail within 3 weeks.¹ Researchers at the University of Massachusetts found that guilt may be the most powerful tools to *inspire* a need or desire for change, but over the course of time, it ends up becoming a destructive force in life, often undermining the very impulse towards change. Guilt is associated with lowered concentration and productivity, and is linked to depression, isolation and shortened lifespan.²

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703478704574612052322122442>

² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-squeaky-wheel/201503/the-surprising-upside-guilt-and-shame>; for further reflection on this idea, Psychologists Claire Adams and Mark Leary engaged a group of young adults seeking to lose weight. They were divided into two groups, one of which was told to keep trying in light of temporary dieting setbacks, the other group was made to feel guilty and ashamed of their dieting failures. Both groups then had plates of doughnuts and bowls of candy placed before them. The guilt-induced group ended up indulging in twice the sugar consumption.

For many of us, guilt has been our primary motivator, whether bestowed upon by parents or simply ignited by our own self-critiques. But if guilt is a terrible motivator, what could be a different path forward?

Such a path would be posited by the Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski. Born 1902, Dabrowski would become a leading expert in the field of human motivation. His inspiration came when he was 12, witnessing the aftermath of war:

I remember a battle during the First World War...I saw several hundred young soldiers lying dead, their lives cut in a cruel and senseless manner. I witnessed masses of Jewish people being herded toward ghettos. On the way, the weak, the invalid, the sick were killed ruthlessly ... The juxtaposition of...inhuman humans with those who were sensitive, capable of sacrifice, courageous, gave a vivid panorama of a scale of values from the lowest to the highest.

From that moment forward, Dabrowski devoted his life to develop a psychological model of motivation, of what allows a person to reach towards these highest of human values or fall into the basest layers of inhumanity. For him, guilt was but the first primal step in the journey of change, our first sense of the disparity in who we are versus who we want to be. But, as he posited in his career, the highest forms of humanity can only be achieved when we go beyond guilt to a motivation of purpose.³

Alice Miller, the Jewish psychologist who survived the Warsaw ghetto, echoed this teaching:

Many people suffer all their lives from this oppressive feeling of guilt, the sense of not having lived up to their parents' expectations. This feeling is stronger than any intellectual insight they might have, that it is not a child's task or duty to satisfy his parents' needs. No argument can overcome these guilt feelings...⁴

So much of the guilt that weighs on us, that saps the soul and diminishes our life expectancy, plays out the drama and needs of other people and other generations. And, if left unchecked, we may live our whole lives playing out these obligations to a purpose not our own.

In years such as this, many of us suffer from injustice and compassion fatigue. When there is so much need, so many things wrong with our country and world, when hate seems to hammer us from every direction, we may notice a quieting of the heart and spirit. Natural disaster or political discord may urge us to commit to a cause with fierce urgency, but so often, as the weeks become months, we've moved on in attention and care. It is when we see ourselves still volunteering a year later, we know that we have moved beyond that initial obligation and guilt, and into the place of purpose; the place of our elevated humanity.

As it is with the human psyche, so it is with the Jewish soul. It is time we move beyond Jewish guilt, this first step of growth, and set our sights on the long road of purpose.

³ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/creative-synthesis/201501/shame-and-motivation-change>

⁴ [The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self](#)

For many of us, if we are pressed to articulate the purpose of Judaism, we might reference the sacrifices previous generations made for our Jewish identity, the perpetuation of peoplehood, the continuation of a 4,000 year old tradition. Ironically, for me growing up, Hitler was one of the primary motivators for Jewish identity; it was incumbent upon me and my generation to ensure his racial genocide would forever fail. For so many of us, Judaism is a sacred homage to the courage and strength of an unbreakable chain. For some of us, it is a purpose that we feel in particular moments and places; from the Passover seder table to sitting here today and listening to Avinu Malkeinu. But what if, as Dabrowski and Miller posit, the highest form of the Jewish psyche requires more than this?!

Like many before me, I believe the purpose of Judaism is more than obligation to the past, more than ethnic survival, more than guilt, more than obligation, more than lox and bagels. So I offer a different purpose with ancient roots:!

The purpose of Judaism is fulfillment and flourishing, personally and globally. Maimonides made this claim in his Guide for the Perplexed, saying that the whole of the Torah “aims at two things: the wellness of the soul and the wellness of the body”⁵, and the Torah itself says that its purpose is to help people live in a way that is “wise and discerning”⁶. Nahmanides held that every mitzvah, every Jewish responsibility and practice has a *to’elet* – a benefit – intended to help our growth of mind, body, and spirit. Jewish wisdom and practice has always promised to make one better, wiser, and more fulfilled. The challenge is that many of us have lost a purpose beyond the monikers of “tradition” and “continuity.” For many of us, when we look at the sources of fulfillment and meaning in our lives, Judaism is often not its primary source.

There is a reason why meditation studios are booming, why every SoulCycle class is filled, and why wellness has exploded into a 3 trillion dollar industry.⁷ In 2017, we crave fulfillment and meaning, and we are willing to invest our time, energy, and money in the places that offer them.

And there is a reason why we prioritize a night out on the town over a night volunteering in our homeless shelter. Why we are more likely to light the screen on our Kindle than kindle the lights of Shabbat. Why one of the most popular Jewish books on Amazon is “How to Lead a 10 Minute Passover Seder,”⁸ but there’s seemingly no market for the book on “How to Feel Like you Ran the NYC Marathon in 10 Minutes.” Obligation is not enough to consistently take us to the heights of humanity nor the peaks of Jewish life.

When Jewish practice feels off-message, when doing Jewish feels only like a nod to the past without also being a courageous practice towards the future, when Jewish learning conjures up memories of falling asleep more than recalling our greatest times of inspiration, we see what happens when we spin away from meaningful purpose. And what an inspiring purpose have we – our purpose is fulfillment, in our life and the life of the world around us. In the way that the term “mindfulness” has come to mean “intentional, calm, centered,” and “organic” has come to mean “healthy” and “better,” imagine if “Jewish” meant “authentic,” “fulfilling,” “a pathway to thriving?”

⁵ 3:28

⁶ Deuteronomy 4:6

⁷ <https://www.globalwellnessinstitute.org/wellness-now-a-372-trillion-global-industry/>

⁸ While it is advertised as 30 minutes, most users report accomplishing it in closer to 10 minutes. Written by Robert Kopman.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, one of the greatest of the Talmudic sages was a leader of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Second Temple. Looking out at the ruins of Biblical Judaism, Rabbi Yochanan lived at a time when the heart of Judaism, the Temple, had been destroyed, so he joined with others to envision a new path of purpose. He gathered his five top students and asked them to go out and discover the path to fulfillment in life.

They returned with a number of answers: “A good eye – one who can perceive goodness in every place and offer gratitude.” Another suggested “Good awareness – one who ponders how her actions may shape the future.” Another offered, “A good friend and neighbor – one connected with others.” And finally, “A good heart – one who seeks wholeness in himself and pursues wholeness for others.”

Rabbi Yochanan listened to each of his disciples as they defended their responses and, after careful thought, chose the last one of these answers – a good heart – for one who seeks wholeness in himself and others includes all the other paths for fulfillment. According to Rabbi Yochanan, the path to fulfillment requires each of the avenues presented by his students. He viewed fulfillment as a matrix of three key elements – gratitude, purpose, and relationship.⁹

Even as decades of research on Positive Psychology have now provided scientific data that posits the same three pillars, ours is an ancient wisdom that believes we are meant to flourish and help the flourishing of others. And, as Rabbi Yochanan and Positive Psychology suggest, our clear pathway to such flourishing is gratitude, purpose, and relationship.

Gratitude

John Kralik tells the story of his life coming apart – his health, finances, marriage, every aspect of his life fell in shambles. He sought help, tried every avenue of change possible. Then one New Year’s Day while hiking, John reflected there was one path he had never taken – the path of gratitude. He started to write one thank you note every day, once a day forcing himself to find the space for blessing even when so much falls apart. One year later, his intentions changed his own attitude towards life, and his words inspired thousands, now igniting an entire movement of gratitude.¹⁰ If, right here and right now, you find yourself wishing for greater satisfaction and fulfillment in life and could only make one change in those efforts, just do this: begin your day with gratitude. Without any other change in the rhythms of life, without altering diet or exercise routines, without switching jobs or getting a makeover, study after study points to the power of taking notice of blessing and opening each day with thanks. And, it just so happens ours is a tradition that instructs us to begin each day with these words, “Modeh Ani Lifanecha” – I offer thanks to you God for returning my soul to me. For giving me an additional day of life. Over the course of a day, we are asked to say 100 blessings; that is, 100 times a day we are meant to stop and take notice of a blessing before us.

For, in Judaism, a blessing is nothing more than a moment of mindfulness. Can we notice the blessing of clothing, the wonder of a rainbow, the dazzling sound of a new melody? Can we pause before we consume a bite, become aware of those without such blessing, and bring intention to a mundane act? Could we offer gratitude for gathering in community, or appreciate surviving a harrowing cab ride? There is a Jewish blessing for truly everything under the sun, and the purpose of these blessings is not the words, but the awareness they foster. An awareness that cultivates gratitude, one of the pillars of human fulfillment.

⁹ Pirkei Avot 2:13-14

¹⁰ [A Simple Act of Gratitude](#)

Purpose

From our biblical origin stories onwards, our tradition believes there is purpose to our existence. Dr. Martin Seligman tells the story of a client of his, a bagger at a grocery store. Sarah was putting herself through college by bagging groceries. It was a job – it paid the bills, but she hated every minute of it. After working with Seligman, Sarah realized that her greatest strength was social intelligence. So she re-crafted how she thought about bagging groceries. Sarah decided to use her gifts to create meaning in the lives of her customers, seeing her three-minute encounters at the check-out line an opportunity to live out her purpose. One month later she reported never feeling more fulfilled in her life, and she affected hundreds of people in the process.¹¹ We often believe we need revolutions in our lives to create fulfillment but, at times, it is simply learning how to bring purpose into our work, our hobbies, our relationships, our volunteerism that can turn even the most mundane of activities into a source of flourishing.

So often we focus on *what* we do as the source of fulfillment, or lack thereof, and rarely talk about *why* we do something as such a source. The greatest of Talmudic sages occupied themselves in ways that may be surprising – Hillel was a woodchopper, Shammai worked in construction, Rav Papa was a beer brewer, Abba Oshiya was a launderer. Our sages believed that Torah was found in every endeavor and every space of life. From the bathroom to the bedroom to the boardroom. Ours is a tradition that was never meant to be relegated to Shabbat services or the Passover seder table only; it was meant to give us a vocabulary to see purpose in our every action and interaction, and transform our daily experiences into audacious acts that can ripple out cosmic effects.

Relationship

The most important and impactful aspect of human flourishing is belonging, is being in meaningful relationship with others.¹² And this is not actually about romantic relationships of love or marriage, but a sense of belonging within a small group of people. Psychologists Martin Seligman and Ed Diener conducted a study wherein they compared people who described themselves as very satisfied with those who claimed to be very unsatisfied in life. There were no differences based on socio-economic status, gender identity, marital status, or age. The only difference found between the two populations was that the “very satisfied” group also reported to have a network of “deep and satisfying social relationships.” Being a part of a small community of people transforms the human experience.

From the beginning, our tradition claims connection as the foundation of life. *Lo tov Heyot Adam l’vado* - “It is not good for a person to be alone,” is the divine voice that echoes forward through the generations. As humanity would spread from Eden to the edges of the world, we learn that the gathering of 10 worthy individuals is mighty enough to sway God. 2000 years ago, the early rabbis claimed communal counting as the new Temple, the gathering of souls as the walls in which God dwells. *Minyan* – the smallest definition of community, the counting of individuals into a collective of 10, is all that is needed for the most sacred. And in this way, the heart of Judaism could never again be destroyed through siege or expulsion. For the heart of Judaism, the house of God, rests in the power of people gathering, where each person counts.

¹¹ https://www.edge.org/conversation/martin_seligman-eudaemonia-the-good-life

¹² <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/pieces-mind/201403/create-sense-belonging>

As it is with the human psyche, so it is with the Jewish soul. It is time we move beyond Jewish guilt, this first step of growth, and set our sights on the long road of purpose. The purpose of Judaism is fulfillment and flourishing, personally and globally. Through gratitude, purpose, and relationship our Jewish tradition gives us the tools to thrive.

And so, this fall, we are launching a new initiative with ancient roots here at Congregation Rodeph Sholom. Over the past three years, Cantor De Lowe and I have been experimenting with ways we can bring these pillars of human flourishing into the heart of our community. And thanks to hundreds of you who came forward saying you are looking for more meaning and connection, we have had the chance to quietly test these ideas. On October 3rd, we will launch Minyan, a model of community-building within CRS where our members knit together in groups of 10 with the purpose of connection. With monthly gatherings, each Minyan is structured to elevate conversation in a way that fosters these three pillars of flourishing. Whatever your passions or proclivities, whatever your needs or yearnings, Judaism believes there is Torah there, and we want this community to help you find belonging with fellow journeyers on similar roads. We will have Minyanim focused on poetry and food, meditation and art, music and spiritual recharging. Join us for our launch night on October 3rd and hear from others about Minyan and what it can mean in your life.

Throughout our tradition and our liturgy, we continually return to the same yearning, the same hope: our vision of a world of Shalom, a world of peace. Our very namesake, Rodeph Sholom, “Pursuers of Peace,” carries the heart of our collective call. But this translation of “shalom” as “peace,” fails to capture the essence of the word. For it moves us to visions of an absence of war, a global scale of serenity and calm. But most Biblical scholars, both Jewish and Christian, prefer a different definition of shalom, one that speaks to both the personal and collective contexts of our sacred text. Best translated, “shalom” really means “flourishing.”¹³ Our yearning, personally, collectively, is always a movement towards flourishing, a life and world where we find fulfillment, pursue purpose, savor blessing, and create belonging.

This is Judaism’s purpose: fulfillment and flourishing, personally and globally. The best minds of our tradition and modernity have articulated – the more fulfillment we create in our own lives, the more likely we are to want to pursue the wellbeing and fulfillment of others in a sustained way.

Imagine finding belonging in place of loneliness, and feel compelled to bring such blessing to those abandoned on the streets of New York.

Imagine purpose in place of stagnancy, and our careers, our relationships, our hobbies, become pathways to purposes beyond ourselves.

Imagine gratitude in place of discontent, recognizing abundance in own lives and feel compelled to share this bounty with those in need.

¹³ See Nicolas Wolterstorff’s writings, particularly as referenced in [Shalom and the Ethics of Belief](#) by Nathan D. Shannon.

Let this be our resolution this new year:

May we move from guilt to purpose,

May we turn to our 4,000 year old toolkit of flourishing, and build habits of growth

May we knit together this community in a way in which each person feels needed and necessary

And may we take up the mantle of this 175 year old legacy as Rodeph Shalom, pursuers of flourishing.

Beginning in our own lives, through gratitude, purpose, and relationship, may we make this a year of flourishing. And may we feel the urgency to bring these sacred pillars out to each and every person.

This is the purpose of Judaism.

This is *our* purpose.

This is Rodeph Shalom.