

What Do We Want?

What Should We Want?

Once again we have entered this Sanctuary. We greet each other, we hug, man do we hug, we schmooze and put on a game face. But just beneath the surface we may harbor feelings or anxieties. We often possess hidden yearnings.

Our Eastern European teacher the Dubner Maggid told this parable:

Once there was a grocer who lived in a small village. Once a year he goes to the big city and is dazzled by all that is on display there. He piles things in his basket but when he gets to the cashier and looks in his purse he is instantly embarrassed and says in a whisper, “I am so sorry. I cannot have everything I want.”

The Dubner Maggid continues:

We call out to God Avinu Malkeinu, give us health

Avinu Malkeinu, give us wealth

But at some point, we may stop ourselves and assess: I know what I want, but what do I need?

The Dubner is right. We have wants. We want reservations to the hottest restaurant. We want tickets, the best seats to the best shows at the right time. We need to get to the right doctor. A close comedic friend of mine called up a specialist and was told that the first appointment was in eight weeks. Eight weeks? “Let me ask you a question,” he said. “If President Kennedy, of blessed memory, needed an appointment, could you get him in this week?”

“Well I’d have to ask my boss but I’m sure we could accommodate President Kennedy.”

“Well sadly, he is no longer with us. I’ll take his appointment.”

And of course we want the best schools for our children. Clearly, you and I are blessed to have the best schools right here: The Rodeph Sholom School and the Rodeph Sholom Religious School (you thought this sermon was commercial-free). With great pride RSS will be celebrating our fiftieth anniversary this year and that is worthy of a hearty shout-out. But as we all well know you don't have to be Felicity or Lori to be stressed about getting our kids into the schools of our choice. And if we are honest, many of us do all we can within legal limits to accomplish our heartfelt aims. Their success or failure reflects on us, we believe. So we diminish our checkbooks, maximize our contacts, anything and everything to gain that seat. If he or she does not get in, you are devastated. Now what happens? Often your child goes off to another school and is happy and fulfilled. Looking back a few years later we wonder how much did it really matter? What difference did it make in her life or in yours?

What do you want in your life?

What should you want?

Some of the most profound and important experiences we have with our children happen right here in our synagogue, often on this bimah. Take Bar and Bat Mitzvah, in my mind the most important ritual any religion has ever devised. We say to our thirteen-year-olds, you are needed to carry on this miraculous history, the four-thousand-year-old journey of a resilient people who refused to disappear from the world. You are needed, we tell them, by God, by your community, and by your world. You can make a difference. All of us at Rodeph Sholom work hard to make sure that this experience is one of the most meaningful in your entire life. And we do a great job in my humble opinion. After all their hard work, they deserve a celebration. This is a real simcha, Siman Tov u'Mazel Tov! Celebrate, of course.

But, ask yourself: have we achieved the right balance between bimah and party? Do our kids understand what's really important to you and is that communicated by the amount of time we devote to each element of this journey?

The story is told of a guy named Murray who was planning a Bar Mitzvah for his son like no one else had ever seen. Invitees would be flown first class to Africa, mounted on elephants to trudge through remote jungles to an extraordinary beautiful setting where the ceremony would be held.

For hours the procession ambled through dense bush until suddenly there was a big hold-up. Nobody in the back could see what the problem was, so they called forward elephant to elephant to see what the hold-up is. Slowly the answer came back rider to rider, elephant to elephant.

“We had to stop. There is another Bar Mitzvah in front of us.”

Believe it or not, our kids really do enjoy their celebration more knowing that not only have they worked hard and participated in the mitzvah of Jewish continuity, but that they’ve also really done something to help others in the process. I am so impressed for example with the mitzvah projects our kids do to help the Jewish world and the world at large. Many of our kids continue this work bringing hope, Torah, and blessing long after they have left the bimah. Many of our kids stay involved in Rodeph Sholom long after their service. This is a reason why I ask people not to say my child has become Bat Mitzva’ed. Because you are the son and daughter of the Mitzvot for the rest of your life, this is an orientation to living, to finding meaning, and giving blessing to others.

It is a true Shehechyanu moment. But of course life also gives us jolts that can bring us to our knees. My colleague Rabbi Bradley Artson learns that his son is autistic. “I thought the entire universe had caved in,” he wrote, “I have been betrayed by God and the cosmos.” But as time went on Rabbi Artson was in a very different place.

My son Jacob taught me to let go of thousands of expectations. I learned to appreciate his many gifts, to love him for who he was, to thank God for the blessing of Jacob, not the Jacob I projected, but the Jacob I now hold in my arms.

The best laid plans, right?

Author Judith Viorst wrote:

Quality time, and a book before bedtime at night

I did everything right.

Then why, when I reach out to touch him, does he hold me at bay?

Something inside of me dies

When I look in my son's shuttered eyes,  
So far from here. So very far away.  
Tricking and treating and soccer games  
And yet now he is stumbling through jungles of bittersweet black.  
Unwilling, or unable to come back.  
I never claimed to be the perfect mother.  
I made mistakes.  
But God, I was so glad to be his mother.  
And God,  
I love this kid.  
Did I do something wrong?  
Am I kidding myself?  
Telling myself a few lies,  
While somewhere a frightened child cries,  
And I wait, and I hope, and I pray that he'll find his way home.

We yearn for return. Perhaps it's a case of family estrangement that can rip us apart. Perhaps we yearn for our child to come back from the black hole of depression, from drug and alcohol dependency, from relationships that have been inappropriate which have brought out the very worst in them. We yearn for their return as we ask on this Holy Day, is there something I can do to help, have I done all I can, have I given them un-ambivalent support, reminding them that in their brokenness they still can count on us to pick up the pieces, to show them that we love them, are proud of them in their struggle and confident they can find their way back?

The *Boston Globe* some years ago sported this headline: “The Biggest Threat Facing Middle Aged Men Isn’t Smoking Or Obesity. It Is Loneliness.” That can be true for women too. Very often women in committed relationships are lonely as well.

Those of us who are in a relationship often yearn for a true partner. There is a lovely story told by author Somerset Maughin called “The Colonel’s Lady.” about a man who buries his nose in the morning paper, living with a wife he hasn’t truly seen in years.

One day a book was delivered to the house. It turns out it was a book of poems written by the colonel’s wife. The colonel reacts with amused indulgence. He gives a rather patronizing smile before turning back to his paper. He never understood this woman he occupied space with.

Soon, however, all of London is talking about the poems. They are erotic and vivid. In striking images the poems describe a torrid affair. The colonel now is in a total tizzy. In excruciating pain he confronts his wife and asks if the poems are really true. She confesses, yes they are based on reality.

“I demand to know who it is,” he thundered.

In a soft voice his wife answers, “It was you. You, it was the you as you were all those years ago, when you really loved me.”

Her husband was incredulous. “The poems said that I died.”

“You did,” his wife went on to say. “The man who loved me died.”

What about us? Have we stopped seeing each other? Have we stopped appreciating how blessed we are to have this person in our lives? Do you take them for granted? Did he not see all you have done to support his career, to help you deal with that devastating challenge? Do we not thank, show appreciation enough? Do our actions reflect our desire to be helpful?

I don’t have to tell you that life is insanely busy. Most of us struggle and feel guilty about work-life balance, oh, at least four times a day.

In her book *The Myth of Equal Partnerships* Dr. Dorothy Lockman quotes a dad who remarks “the expectation among my male friends is that they will have the life they had before having kids.

Women are often angry about this while many men don’t seem to realize that there’s a problem at

all.” Of course this is no longer true in all cases and it shouldn’t be true at all. Work-life juggling, caring for nuclear family, caring for aging parents too often means that women will severely compromise career goals, and earn considerably less money. Even in 2019, far more often than not, only one person in a partnership comes home from a full day’s work and begins a full day’s work including the excruciating ritual of waking them up and getting them to school. Dare I even mention walking the dog?

Women need support but also the ability to make decisions about her life, her health, and her ability to decide on whether, when, and how to bear children under perhaps the most unprecedented assault upon women in this land of the free.

It must be our collective resolve not to return to Egypt, not to permit enslavement of women, but to insist that they and we are free to make decisions that allow all of us to fulfill our God given potential for goodness and greatness.

Rosh Hashanah teaches that God has given us the gift of self-regard, the confidence to love ourselves in order to love others. What God has given us, no human, no legislature, no President can ever take away.

On Rosh Hashanah we need to feel the urgency, yearn to return to the person, the Jew, the friend, the family member we’ve always wanted to be. The *Unetaneh Tokef* reminds us that yes—we can shake a fist at God, we can blame everyone else, but that fundamentally there is often something we can do.

Psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl, who survived Nazi death camps, wrote, “For too long we have lived the illusion that if we just improve the socioeconomic situation of people, everything will be okay. The truth is as the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged: survival for what?” Many more people today have the means to live, but not the meaning to live for. To find that purpose, to find the reason God put us on earth is the key to living a successful, blessed life.

Do you remember Steven Spielberg’s movie *Saving Private Ryan*? Remember that crucial scene at the end of the movie when Jim is comforting the soon-to-die captain who has been sent to rescue him from near certain death? While saving him, virtually the entire platoon of soldiers will die, including the captain. In a climactic moment he turns to Private Ryan and says, “James, earn it.” Earn it all.

At the end of our life, don't we fear that we have not done it right? Looking back we should be less concerned about what we own, and much more concerned what we have given. Have we really appreciated the gift of life, have we done something to make a difference? Have we understood our tradition's teaching that good things in life last for limited days, but a good name endures forever?

A good name is the only thing that really matters, the only thing of real value that we leave behind.

So answer this question:

What do wish for on this day?

What should you wish for?

Our question, it seems to me, should be the same as Private Ryan's.

As we think about our life and legacy, tell me, loved ones:

Have I gained respect for my actions, my values?

Can you tell me I am a good person?

And so we pray:

Dear God, help me.

Help me to earn it, help me to earn it all. Amen.