

Journey of our lives- growth and living meaningfully

Yom Kippur morning 2019

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God created the dog and said, 'Sit all day by the door of your house and bark at anyone who comes in or walks past. For this, I will give you a life span of twenty years.'

The dog replied, 'That's a long time to be barking. How about only ten years and I'll give you back the other ten?' So God agreed.

God created the monkey and said, 'Entertain people, do tricks, and make them laugh. For this, I'll give you a twenty-year life span.'

The monkey replied, 'Monkey tricks for twenty years? That's a long time to perform. How about I give you back ten like the dog did?' And God agreed.

God created the cow and said, 'You must go into the field with the farmer all day long and suffer under the sun, have calves and give milk to support the farmer's family. For this, I will give you a life span of sixty years.'

The cow replied, 'That's kind of a tough life you want me to live for sixty years. How about twenty and I'll give back the other forty?' And God agreed again.

God created man and said, 'Eat, sleep, play, marry and enjoy your life. For this, I'll give you twenty years.'

But man said, 'Only twenty years? Could you possibly give me my twenty, the forty the cow gave back, the ten the monkey gave back, and the ten the dog gave back; that makes eighty, okay?'

'Okay,' said God, 'You asked for it.'

So that is why for our first twenty years we eat, sleep, play and enjoy ourselves. For the next forty years we slave in the sun to support our family. For the next ten years, we do monkey tricks to entertain the grandchildren. And for the last ten years, we sit on the front porch and bark at everyone. Life has now been explained to you.¹

I don't know if you are at the stage of youth, working as a cow toiling in the field of life, or barking at all the annoying people you encounter. I can't speak of the life of a dog but sometimes I wouldn't mind being my cat, laying around the living room, and being pet every waking moment. Anyways, for most of us, if we have gained enough years, we know that life has its up and downs, twists and turns, unexpected hardships, and we hope more joy than pain. For those of us with at least three decades or more behind us, when we survey our life, even we may be surprised at where we have been, what we have endured, and where we are today.

This can encompass so many aspects of life. I don't know if your professional life turned out as you planned. Perhaps you went to school imagining a profession in the arts, a successful business or medical career, or enjoying a high paying job with travel perks. I was surprised at

my daughter's orientation at CAL STATE Fullerton how few students directly utilize their college major. I saw one statistic that said 27% of college students actually end up working in the field of their major. I know they shared it with us so we don't freak out if our child decides to be an art, music, or philosophy major. How are they going to make a living doing that?

As an aside, I was a philosophy major in college. The running joke at the time was, "What is the difference between a psychologist and a philosopher? A psychologist points his finger at a problem and works at solving it. The philosopher points that same finger at the same problem but spends all his time staring at his finger." Interestingly, for me, a life time serving the Jewish people, as a rabbi, never ever entered my mind as a child. It just wasn't an option on the menu of choices.

As a middle schooler, I wanted to be a Veterinarian because I loved animals. And then in high school, I imagined myself being a psychologist. And then with my father's encouragement, I started to consider being an attorney. Years earlier, he would tuck me in at night, "Nancy, you argue well. You would make a good lawyer. Night, night." If it wasn't for my rabbi, though, taking me aside on the cusp of college and gently encouraging me in a counter intuitive way, I wouldn't be here at all. Rabbi Herzog spoke through his lush gray beard, "Nancy, if you ever get the strange idea of being a rabbi, come to me first and I will dissuade you of it." It was weird. I thought, "I don't want to be old and boring."

What led you to make the choices that you have made? Schooling and careers are one thing but there are other arenas of life as well. The decision to get married, stay married, get divorced, live as a single, or remarry are major choices. Did things go the way you thought? Most of us think, we will get married and stay happily married for many, many decades. Some of us attain this and others don't. Sometimes we are happier when we separate and other times when we decide to give love another try.

Oh and then there are the children. We work hard with dreams of their success and lifelong happiness and despite our aspirations, they have their own ideas of living. I remember tucking in my daughter at night, noticing her budding love of biology, and suggesting that she could be a neurologist like her uncle Bennett. She pondered that for a moment and then said, "But Mom, I want to be a rock star!" Quickly, I countered, "Well, honey, you could be a doctor during the day and a rock star at night!" Gabriel worriedly asked, "But then, how will I see my children?" Ah, foiled again in my devious plans. We try to give them the tools and values to live a full and productive life and then they step out of the birdie nest and face their own success and failures. It all seems as though nothing goes as planned.

And then there are the unexpected illnesses, setbacks, and loss. Life for any of us is never as smooth as we hoped, doesn't necessarily go on an incline of upward prosperity and happiness. Donniel Hartman of the Hartman Institute, years back spoke about the myth of stability in Western society and the pervasive belief that all will be unchanging. One's certainty in this myth is clearly unrealistic whether facing a recession, illness, or other massive change. Instead of giving way to despair, however, Rabbi Hartman admonishes us to look at change, trials, and transition as opportunities for growth. We can, in essence, be catapulted to grow in the midst of challenge and with the right perspective, luck, faith, and work, we can possibly attain greatness.

In Judaism, our first patriarch Abraham is an example of a man who faced many challenges. Famously in the middle Ages, in *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*, there's an account of the ten trials of Abraham. According to this midrash, rabbinical teaching, Abraham fell into a furnace as little child, was imprisoned for ten years as a youth, left his father's house to move to the Promised Land, encountered famine and had to move to Egypt, had his wife Sarah seized by Pharaoh, fought a war against four kings, had a vision of the future subjugation of our people, was circumcised at the age of 99 years, had to send away his son Ishmael, and was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. Phew! That's a lot for any one person to deal with. In the midrash, Abraham then asks God why was he tested so much given that God knew the choices he would make. God answers that it is in order for others to know Abraham's goodness and faith.

This response would be unpalatable for most of us. To be tested just for the sake of others, I think most of us would say, let the neighbors think what they want, just spare me hardships. Unfortunately, that is generally not an option for us. We will all in time face illness, failure, death, and hardship. Even *Abraham avinu*, Abraham our father, doesn't get off easy. And so Abraham towards the end of this Midrash asks God to remember the binding of Isaac and forgive his descendants for their transgressions for generations to come. Basically, don't let it all be for nothing. (*Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* 8th century)

I often think of how I can make the most of the trials in my life. How I can learn from them and grow. It's not always easy but I like to make lemonade out my lemons, even better with some good vodka and see opportunity even in disappointment. Some of you, I know, have even greater words of wisdom to share on this topic. There are many things we don't have control over. We have the genes that we have. At times, we don't get to choose the circumstances of our lives. But there is something we can always choose.

Viktor Frankel in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, asserts that one can always select one's attitude. It would be easy to dismiss him, however Viktor lived in and survived four Nazi death camps. He lost his parents, brother, and pregnant wife. He suffered starvation, illness, and extreme cruelty. Without an ability to change his circumstance, Viktor went within, and

asserted, “Any man can...decide what shall become of him –mentally and spiritually. He may retain his human dignity even in a concentration camp.”² Viktor asserts that it is our spiritual freedom that makes life meaningful and that can never be taken away. We, and we alone, no matter what we are enduring, no matter how extreme we suffer, we can choose our attitude. We can focus on Nietzsche’s words, “He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how.”³

And so this begs the question for us today. Why do you live? What do you live for? It’s not the breaking of the fast even though as the day wanes that will become more and more appealing. It’s something deeper. Is it our work? Our writing? Our children? Our love? What is it? What drives us? What enables us to live and continue to live even with disappointment and loss? Viktor reminds us in his book that suffering isn’t necessary to have meaning but even with it, one can still find purpose even in times of pain. It’s my hope that none of you is in a constant state of suffering but when it occurs and forever how long, remember, that life is still valuable and that each of us has a purpose, a reason to be here, and to continue to live.

There is a poem by Alvin Fine that I sometimes share at funerals. He writes:

Birth is a beginning
 And death a destination;
 But life is a journey,
 A going- a growing
 From stage to stage.
 From childhood to maturity
 And youth to age.
 From innocence to awareness
 And ignorance to knowing;
 From foolishness to discretion
 And then perhaps to wisdom.
 From weakness to strength
 Or strength to weakness
 And, often, back again.
 From health to sickness
 And back, we pray to health again.
 From offense to forgiveness,
 From loneliness to love,
 From joy to gratitude,
 From pain to compassion,
 And grief to understanding-
 From fear to faith.

From defeat to defeat to defeat
 Until, looking backward or ahead,
 We see that victory lies
 Not at some high place along the way,
 But in having made the journey,
 Stage by stage
 A sacred pilgrimage.

Our lives are a sacred pilgrimage. Each of us is on a journey. Today on Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement, is an excellent day to reflect. Even in the face of defeat, illness, and setbacks, we can decide to act with purpose, joy, and dream for the future. At any age, one can continue to learn and grow. Lois Abrams told me that she brought her older dog to be trained and remarked that that indeed, you can teach an old dog new tricks. What tricks would you like to learn? You don't have to be monkey or perform for anyone. We can choose to try new experiences, learn new skills, develop relationships, and live.

With thought and insight, we can also lessen the regrets. We can strive to make amends, apologize, be more caring, and even change the course of our lives. We can make holy choices that can set the stage for the year to come. We can choose to understand that we are on a sacred journey through life. We can decide even when things don't go as planned, when everything seems to be upturned, that we can still go on, learning, living, and loving.

May we all have renewed will to live with hearts open, hands busy with determination, and minds focused on what we can control and to do all that we can. Regardless of our stage of life, may we still have moments of joy as in our youth, have meaningful work in the fields, still be able to play at every age, and bark a little less, and love a bit more even in our older years. And most of all, remember that life is a sacred pilgrimage.

Notes:

- 1 <https://www.aish.com/j/j/118981599.html>
- 2 Man's Search for Meaning, Viktor Frankel pg. 66
- 3 “ “ pg. 76