

## Planning Less, Living More

There is an old Yiddish Expression- *Mann traoch, Gott Lauch*- "Man plans, and God laughs." In her book, titled after this expression, Rabbi Sherre Hirsch elaborates:

I remember my first plan. It was the Cinderella plan. I was going to become a beautiful princess. Then one day my fair and handsome prince would save me from my regular existence. We would fall in love with one magical kiss and live happily ever after. At the time, the details were foggy, but the plan was in place. As I matured, the elements of the fantasy disappeared, but the dream remained. One day I would fall in love with a wonderful man, get married, have 2.5 children, a house, a dog, and live happily ever after. I never thought about what would happen if the plan did not go as planned (Hirsch, *We Plan, God Laughs*, xvi-xvii).

For many people, these past few years have seemed as if God is having one huge laugh. We have been living through the worst economic period in this country since the Great Depression. And while it seems like we may have reached some type of homeostasis and recovery, the high unemployment rate and slow growth in housing are just a few indicators that there have been some fundamental economic and lifestyle changes in this country. The words of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer ring loudly in our ears:

*Mi Y'chiyeh, Umu Yamut*- Who shall live and who shall die...  
*Mi Yishalev, Umi Yityaser*, Who shall be at peace, and who shall be tormented?  
*Mi Ya'ani, U'mi Yashir*, Who shall be poor and who shall be rich?  
*Mi Yushpal, Umi Yarum*, who shall be humbled and who shall be exalted?

Many people are standing in a very different place on this Rosh Hashanah than they were just a few years ago. The unemployment rate continues to hover at just around 10 percent, and while there are a variety of explanations for this which go far beyond my area of expertise, the bottom line is that we all understand that it is simply harder than it has been in many years for people to find a job. And even if your employment is secure, many in this room have been affected by the economic downturn in a variety of other ways. And though I don't know this for sure, I am hopeful that the

organized Jewish community in this area has, and can continue to be, supportive during these difficult financial times.

At the same time, without minimizing any of the pain, hardship, and distress that comes about with major changes in life, be they economic or otherwise, challenges such as this often force us to think about the following question: *If we plan, and God laughs- how might we plan differently? How might we learn to adjust our expectations?*

Maybe the problem is that we make too many plans in the first place. A few years ago I saw the movie "UP"- a wonderful animated film that is presented as a fun kids' movie, but actually has a very adult message. In the first ten minutes we are shown a flashback of Carl Fredrickson's life. We see how he meets his wife Elie, a fellow adventurer, and how they spend their life together continually making plans to go on one adventure after another, ultimately dreaming of adventuring together to South America to see the great Paradise Falls. They make a scrapbook together to be filled with their future adventures- but slowly we see their dreams slipping away. As Carl and Elie grow older, she gets ill and eventually dies, leaving Carl all alone in their home with nothing but memories and an adventure book presumably filled with blank pages. Eventually, as a way to honor Elie's memory, Carl goes on an adventure of his own to discover Paradise Falls. At the end of his adventure, Carl goes back to fill in the blank pages of the memory book that Elie had created for him only to discover that she had already filled in the pages. They were not left blank for future adventures, but instead contained pictures and mementos from the daily events of their long life together. As he returns home, Carl comes to realize that while Elie was alive, he had been totally preoccupied with making plans for the future, and on his recent adventure he was consumed with looking back at his past with Ellie. What he had missed all along was that the most important moments, the places where success and meaning are to be found- lie not in the future, nor in the past- rather they are right here and right now.

There is a Jewish variant of this lesson, taught to me by Rabbi Ed Feinstein. He tells a story in which a Hassidic master asked his disciples: "What is the most significant moment in all Jewish history? In all the experience of the Jewish people, what stands out as paramount? The students answered: "The crossing of the Red Sea, the giving of the Torah on Sinai, the conquest of Jerusalem." "No." taught the master. "The most important moment in all Jewish history is right now" (*World Of High Holidays*, Vol. 3, 60).

*Hayom*- Today. This word is repeated throughout the liturgy of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. *Hayom Harat Olam*- Today the World was

created. *Hayom T'amtzeynu*- Today God strengthens us. *Hayom T'varcheynu*- Today God blesses us. As Jews we honor the past, and look towards the future, but ultimately *today* is the most important moment. We all love to make plans. I am sure that every one of us in this room has had plans that have at some point been turned upside down. God may be the only One who knows who shall live and who shall die, who shall be poor and who shall be rich, but *we know* what we have in our lives right now, and the central message of the Unetnaeh Tokef prayer is that we must learn to live in the moment that we have.

But living in the moment can be extremely hard. In a wonderful DVD about the themes of the High Holidays that was published by the Ziegler Rabbinical School, there is a roundtable discussion between Rabbis Ed Feinstein, David Wolpe, and Brad Artson discussing the challenges of living in the moment. Rabbi Feinstein suggests that we must all learn how to be more like the GPS systems in our car because they can recalibrate and adjust quite easily. In other words, as we map out our course in life, we must remember that life is not always about following a set map. Our plans, our dreams, our hopes, our aspirations will likely face roadblocks or unexpected detours. What is important in life is to learn to be aware of where we are, *right now, Hayom*, and adjust accordingly.

Rabbi Artson takes this another step, suggesting that we should stop worrying about the map in the first place. Being a Type A personality myself, I am not sure that I could let go of the map entirely- but learning to plan a bit less, adapt a bit more, and focus on the here and now- that is something that each of us could do. *We need to spend more time living and less time planning*. Because if we hold onto our plans and our map too tightly, we may miss understanding just exactly where we are. Like Carl, in the movie "Up" we may fail to see that the most important moments in our life are often the ones that are happening right now.

How we decide to hold onto our map depends on how exactly we measure our success in life. Do we measure success by how well our plan goes, or by how well we were able to adapt and appreciate the blessings of our daily lives? In Pirkei Avot, the Ethical teachings of our sages, Ben Zoma taught: Who is rich? One who is happy with his or her portion (Avot 4:1). At times, this teaching can be incredibly hard to internalize. But part of our challenge in this world is to discover the beauty and holiness in our daily existence and to remind ourselves of the people that matter most to us in this world and the values and beliefs that lie deep within our souls.

In order to do this, in order to truly live and value each day, we have to *plan less and prioritize more*. In a wonderful book entitled, *The Seven Questions You Are Asked In Heaven*, Wolfson writes that the fifth question we will be asked in heaven will center around what mattered to us in life. He explains:

A Priority is what matters most....What matters to you? If you want a clue, think about how you spend your time each day, each week. How much of your time is allocated to work? How much time for your family? How much time for volunteering? How much time for play? How much time for sleep? How much time for eating? How much time for watching television, surfing the Internet, answering your e-mails? Are the things you spend the most time on the things that matter most?...Understanding what matters to you will lead you to a life that matters (87).

Our lives will not go according to plan. So maybe we should stop worrying so much about how our plan is going. Maybe we should focus on asking ourselves what are the most important values in our lives, and be brave enough to see if we are actually living out those values. Maybe, over the next few days, we should spend some time looking at our calendars and seeing how we spent this past year. Did we use our time wisely? Did we spend time on what really matters to us in life? This type of *cheshbon hanefesh*, soul searching that lies at the center of this High Holiday experience, requires that we pay close attention to how we are living our lives. Something that is difficult to be sure, but that is necessary to live a meaningful and rich existence. This type of examination requires us to use our heart, as well as our soul which is why in Hebrew, when we tell someone to pay attention we say: *Sim Lev*, loosely translated as- "use your heart."

Plans, goals, and directions are all important and useful- but if we don't pay attention to the here and now, they can often get in our way. Like Carl's search for Paradise Falls, many of us spend our lives looking for Paradise. We often spend time planning and figuring out how we might finally get ourselves to a better place, a paradise where everything is perfect, where we have no worries and no problems. We tell ourselves that if we follow our plans we will surely get there. But what we often miss is that paradise can be found right beneath our noses. If only we would only shift our perspective a bit.

There is a story in Feinstein's *Capturing The Moon*, that explains this quite well:

There once was a man who had given up on life. He found no joy in his

work, his family, or his community. And so he prayed to God to let him leave this world. "Show me the way to Paradise!" he implored.

God asked him, "Are you sure that's what you want?"

The man replied, "I am sure with all my heart."

"Very well," replied God, who showed him the way to Paradise.

As it turned out, Paradise wasn't far away—just a few days' journey from his village. So late one afternoon he set out on his way. He walked until nightfall and then decided to rest beneath a leafy tree. Just before he fell asleep, it occurred to him that in the morning he might become confused and forget which was the way to Paradise and which was the way back to the village. So he left his shoes by the roadside, with the tips pointing toward Paradise so that in the morning all he'd have to do was jump into his shoes and continue on his way.

But sometimes unexpected things happen. Shoes get turned around. Was it an imp? Was it an angel? Was it just a squirrel? Who knows? But somehow the man's shoes got turned around. In the morning he rose feeling rested from his sleep, ate from the fruit of the tree, and prepared to set off on his journey. He went to the roadway, stepped into his shoes, and began walking—unaware that he was in fact returning home.

By noon he could see a village on the next hillside, and his heart leapt. "I've arrived in Paradise!" he thought. He ran down into the valley and up the hill, not stopping until he had arrived at the gates of the village.

"What a beautiful place is Paradise!" he thought. "My village was always so crowded, so noisy. This is different, so filled with life and joy!" He sat down on a bench in the square and witnessed the life of the village. He heard the songs the children sang at school and the sounds of the adults at work. He felt the vitality, the energy, and the love that filled the village. He sat in the square all day. In the evening he heard the joyful sounds of families reunited at home and smelled the meals that were being enjoyed by each family. And he began to feel hungry.

He thought, "Since Paradise looks so much like my village, I wonder if

there is a street in Paradise like my street." And so he went to look. Just where he thought it might be, there's where he found it.

Then he thought, "I wonder if there is a house in Paradise like my house." And just where he thought it might be, there it was! Just as he was wondering at this marvelous coincidence, a woman came to the door—a woman who bore a striking resemblance to his wife. The woman called his name and asked him to come in for dinner.

His heart leapt. "They know me in Paradise! There is a place set for me here in Paradise!"

"I don't know what's in Paradise," the woman responded, "but your soup is getting cold at home. Come inside!"

He entered the house. This house in Paradise was nothing like his house in the village. That house was always crowded, cluttered, filled with commotion. This place was cozy and homey and filled with life. He sat at the table and ate the best meal he'd ever had. He complimented the woman on her heavenly soup. Afterward he went up to his bedroom and entered the deepest, most restful sleep he'd ever known. In the morning the woman who looked like his wife handed him his tools and sent him to work. At first the man was incredulous. Who ever heard of working in Paradise? But then it occurred to him that even in Paradise there were tasks to be done. And he found that this work was different from the work he'd done before. Not dull or tedious, it filled him with a sense of purpose. And that night he returned to the same warm and loving home, the same kind woman, and more of her wonderful soup.

Do you know that in all the years that followed, no one could convince the man that he hadn't made it to Paradise! Every one of his days from then on was filled with more wonder, more purpose, more joy, and more life than the day before.

Rabbi Feinstein concludes his story with the words from Psalm 92, the Psalm that is recited for Shabbat.

*It is good to give thanks to the Lord, To Praise Your Name O Most High.*

*To tell of your love each morning, and your faithfulness each night.*

*"Like the man in the story, the Psalmist opened his eyes to a different way of seeing the world. The facts of his life remained the same. Only his attitude changed. And suddenly life was very different" (17-19).*

Instead of searching for paradise around the corner and nervously planning while waiting for God to laugh, we need only to shift our perspective and realize that often times, Paradise is staring us right in the face. Right here, Right now, Hayom- every moment of every day has the potential to be paradise- but only if each of us has the courage to make it so.

*L'Shanah Tova Tikateivu-* May we all be inscribed for a good, healthy, and meaningful year.