

Rediscovering The Diamonds In Our Lives

These days it seems that life is filled with distractions. How many times a day do you look at a webpage and get distracted by one of the many ads, contest announcements, or surveys, so much so that you can hardly find, let alone remember, what you were looking for in the first place? How often during the workday are you thrown off of a task because of an incoming e-mail, text message or phone call. How frequently do you get so engrossed in a phone conversation while you are driving that you miss your turn on the road? And even worse, how often do you lose your train of thought, or realize you're not paying attention to your friend, co-worker, spouse or child because of all of the other things running through your head?

It seems as if we are living in a world where distractions have become a built-in part of our daily existence. And they are so prevalent, many people become completely immune to them. The technology and pace of the world today adds more distractions than ever. But the challenge of living a focused and driven life is nothing new.

There is a wonderful story in a book recently written by Rabbi Ed Feinstein called *Capturing the Moon* that illustrates this point:

There once was a very poor man, who could provide his family with only the barest most meager substance. The family ate potatoes for breakfast. They ate potatoes for lunch. And for dinner, potatoes once again. The monotony of the potatoes and the poverty of their lives wore on him and his family, but they could afford nothing else.

One day the man found an old book, and inside the book was a map showing the way to the Island of Diamonds. An island of diamonds! This must be the answer to all his problems. He would sail to the island, collect the diamonds, and return home rich as a king! And so he set out.

He borrowed a boat from a friend, took the map in his hand, and set sail to the Island of Diamonds. The seas were not easy to cross. Many times he thought he might be drowned by the storms and the waves. But finally one morning when he awoke, there on the horizon was a brilliant light—a light brighter than the sun. "It is the Island of Diamonds!" he thought, and he began to row

furiously.

Soon the island came into view. And it was true. Right before him was a beautiful white beach, stretching as far as he could see, covered with brilliant diamonds. His heart leapt as he pulled his small boat ashore. "I'm rich! I'm the richest man in the world!" He jumped from the boat, carrying the dozen potato sacks he had brought from home, and began to fill the sacks with diamonds.

While he was busily packing the sacks with diamonds, the people of the island came down to the shore and stood watching him.

"What are you doing?" they asked curiously.

"What do you mean 'What am I doing?'" he replied in astonishment. "I'm gathering diamonds! I'm going to be rich—the richest man in the world!"

"Rich?" they laughed. "Those pebbles won't make you rich! Why, the whole island is covered with them; they're as common as rain."

"If these won't make me rich," he asked in utter puzzlement, "what will? What is it that you value here?"

"Well," the people responded, "there was once a fellow who found something much more valuable than those pebbles. He went up into the fields and came back with potatoes! Potatoes— now that's wealth!"

"Potatoes? Potatoes are wealth? I know more about potatoes than anyone! Just wait here." And with that he dumped the diamonds out of his sack and ran into the fields. Within fifteen minutes he had found a dozen potatoes. He returned to the crowd at the beach.

"Here—potatoes! And there are plenty more where these came from!"

"Potatoes!" the crowd repeated in awe. They carried the man on their shoulders from the beach and immediately declared him king of the island. All the luxuries of the island were brought to him. He was revered and worshipped. All he had to do was go into the fields and find a few potatoes each week.

After a year of this, he remembered his family back home and informed the islanders that he would soon be leaving. He set sail and faced the harsh trip home.

When he arrived in his home port, his family, friends, and neighbors turned out to meet him. Having been feared lost at sea these many months, he was greeted with tears and hugs. And finally his wife mustered the courage to ask, "Did you find the Island of Diamonds?"

"Did I find the Island of Diamonds! I became king of the Island of Diamonds!" he boasted.

Then, breathlessly, she asked him, "Have you brought us diamonds?"

"Diamonds? Heavens no!" he said. "I brought back something much more valuable than diamonds!"

"More valuable than diamonds? What could be more valuable than diamonds?" she inquired.

In response he hefted two huge sacks from the boat and spilled their contents on the dock.

"Behold," he announced gloriously, "I bring you potatoes!"

His wife tried to make sense of what she saw. "Have you lost your mind? You went to an island of diamonds, and you brought back potatoes? We have potatoes coming out of our ears!"

The expression of triumph quickly vanished from his face as he recognized what he had done. He'd gone to the ends of the earth to find diamonds and returned with potatoes.

Rabbi Feinstein uses this story to remind us that one of the most serious spiritual challenges that we face in life is distraction. We want to spend more time focusing on ourselves, our health, our families, our careers, but we end up getting distracted and thrown off course by the daily task of living. Too often do we start out in search of diamonds, but end up with potatoes.

Fortunately, one of the gifts that Rosh Hashanah gives us is the opportunity to re-focus on the diamonds in our life. During Rosh

Hashanah, and the month of Elul that precedes it, we engage in the process of teshuvah, or repentance, so that we can literally turn ourselves and see where we are and where we would like to be. We turn inward. We turn towards God. And we turn towards one another to regain our bearings and re-focus our direction.

This is why one of the most common words for sin used throughout the liturgy is *cheit*. “Cheit” is an archery term that is more literally translated as a “missed mark.” Every time we read that we have committed a “cheit,” we are to ask ourselves where we have lost focus and missed the mark and how we can re-focus our actions.

Indeed Judaism warns us against becoming distracted twice a day, in the words of the third paragraph of the Sh’ma. This biblical passage talks about the mitzvah of wearing tzitzit, fringes:

וְלֹא תִתְּנוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר-אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם:
לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתַי וְהֵייתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים לֹא-לְהֵיכֶם

We are to avoid being led astray by our eyes and our hearts so that we can remember to live lives filled with Jewish practice and Jewish values, with holiness and the potential to discover God’s presence in our daily living.

It is very easy to become distracted from these lofty goals. Our tradition knew this, which is why our system of prayer reminds us of this in the recitation of the Shema twice every day. If we want to come home with a bag full of diamonds instead of one full of potatoes, we need to continually try to stay focused on what really matters to us in our life.

Let me now share with you the very end of Rabbi Feinstein’s story:

Resigned to the fact that she would never see any diamonds, the poor man’s wife took the potatoes home and prepared them for dinner. While she cooked, the children played with the empty sacks. And as they turned the sacks inside out, they found there, lodged in the mesh of the bag, a few small diamonds—diamonds.

Fortunately, just like in the story, there are always a few diamonds hidden among the potatoes of our life. Rosh Hashana is a time to both redirect our life’s focus, and to re-discover those lost and neglected diamonds hiding in the creases of our lives.

So tonight, as we celebrate this season of renewal together, let us all ask ourselves to take a good hard look at our lives. Are we living lives filled with diamonds, or have we somehow ended this year with a sack filled with potatoes? Where have we become distracted and how can we re-focus on what we claim is important in our lives? What do we have to change in order to regain the treasure that we have somehow lost along the way?

May each of us honestly grapple with these questions, in the hopes of discovering the treasures that are most dear to us. And may we all have a Shanah Tovah U'metukah, A Good and Sweet New Year.