To Grow in Wisdom
Rosh Hashanah, 2013, 5744

“What do you do?” It is a common conversation opener with someone we have just met. I use it often. Actually, my internal GPS wants to ask “Who are you?’ But that is a bit too confrontational for an initial conversation. We take a measure of a new person — education? socio-economic level? Is he worthy of further engagement? -- by probing his place in the realms of commerce and society as we formulate them. Where do she fit in to the template with which we view the world?

“What do you do?” is a useful conversation starter. It also points to something about ourselves: We define ourselves by the roles we play in life. We internalize our exterior. Men do so more intensely than woman; although more and more woman do so too. Our careers, accomplishments, our activities form the façade with which we face those around us. And how we present to others often becomes the primary way we think about ourselves.

In this season of spiritual introspection we are urged to strip away the façade we present to others and internalize. Stripped of pretense and hubris, today we need to ask the most piercing question: “Who am I?”

I.A. A Hassidic teaching gives direction for a first answer:

“Each of us should carry in our pockets two notes, inscribed with words of Torah,” urged Rabbi Simcha Bunim. On one is written: “In the image of God He created them...little lower than the angels.” On the second piece of paper: “I am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27).

The teaching reminds us of our basic nature: We are created in God’s image, which is to say we have the capacity for greatness: creativity, kindness, insight and compassion. Deep within our souls are impulses for justice in society, the pursuit of beauty, peace between one person and the next and harmony in the world. We have a keen sense of right and wrong and the ability to examine ourselves and make right choices. We carry a sense of hopefulness for tomorrow.

“Who am I?” I am a human being capable of climbing to heights of goodness. Stripping away the preoccupation with running and doing I find within me a
reservoir of giving, of loving, of sharing, of reaching out to others worthy of praise in any court, earthy or divine.

Recognizing my potential, now I know what I should be doing:

- Embrace my most worthy impulses so that they energize more and more of my day to day life.
- Occupy myself more and more with deeds and gestures and words and acts which I admire in myself and know to be right – the way of living Jewish tradition urges -- and want to have fill my life.

"Elu d’varim sheh ayn lahem shiyur --These are acts of goodness which we can do without limit, whose reward too is unlimited."

I. B But I must also grasp the second half of Rabbi Bunin’s message: In reality I am much less than I think I am. “Dust and ashes” is a biblical phrase that points to our physical mortality and, perhaps, to our baser (spell check wrote ‘beastly’) human inclinations. Probing my inner self more deeply, with brutal candor, inevitably I confront my limitations.

- Good intentions unrealized.
- Noble priorities pushed aside by what I rationalize as the “necessities of daily routine.”
- Grudges tenaciously maintained
- Poor habits restricting growth and health.
- Too often, harmful words.
- Sometimes harmful acts which injure those I say I love the most.

Here the spiritual task is more difficult: It takes courage to acknowledge our failings; it takes brutal honesty to abandon the excuses and rationalizations for how we have acted; it takes strength to find a new path and effect genuine change.

“Litte lower than the angels/dust and ashes”. The task is to touch and intensify the sweetest n’shmah within us and to lighten our dark underside of human weakness and inadequacy. And thereby to find wholeness and peace in our hearts even as we share these qualities with others.

II. Who am I? This is a task for us at any moment in our lives, any age. This existential question is always relevant -- and certainly so in the solemn
atmosphere of this time and space.

*And its relevance and sense of urgency becomes more pronounced as we grow older.*

A. There comes a time when we begin to follow the Psalmist’s advice to count the number of our years more often. When we have fewer obligations and more leisure time, we may experience some press in the counting and also a window of opportunity.

Let us be frank: Though in our generation life span has increased significantly, ‘four score years’ and more creep up on us very, very quickly.

Now some of you may begin to nudge your neighbor, “Blumberg is talking about himself” You are right, but swimming “Denial River” by thinking I am only talking about myself won’t help you. Every person in this room is growing older, some of us faster than others. Fifty may be the new forty and sixty the new fifty but…inevitably sixty follows fifty and seventy and eighty are waiting in line.

B. Who am I?

*What do I want to do -- need to do -- with the rest of my life?*

Remember your resolve to make the world a better place, Tikun Olam? How many obstacles stood between your intentions and reality? You know now that your dreams were unrealistic, beyond your capacity. The world is too large, too complicated for such altruistic goals. And all that “stuff” of living kept getting in the way.

But now, with more leisure time and greater wisdom, you can realize a measure of that noble dream.

- Touch one needy soul, enrich one child hungering for knowledge, and leave your so-small corner of the world somewhat better

- Examine relationships with those closest to you. Can they be strengthened, repaired, enriched?

- Remember the people who you have gathered over the years, friendships ignored? Can neglect be overcome? Can reconnecting bring joy and healing balm to you? To them?
C. I have a professional advantage that helps me ask myself the “Who am I?” question…often.

When I meet with a family preparing for the funeral of a loved one I usually ask the question, “Tell me about your dad or your mom’s legacy to you? The lasting influences, the life-lessons, that have shaped and will continue to mold your life?”

I always emerge from that conversation asking myself -- wondering, imagining -- how someday my children and grandchildren will respond. And I ask myself the question anew:

- “What is my lasting legacy to those whom I love and care most about?”
- “What story do I want others to tell of me?”
- “Who am I at my core?

You don’t have to be a rabbi or a cantor to pose this challenge. You just have to grasp those two pieces of paper, hold them in your hands, think of the people you love and take an inventory of who you are, what you have done and what in your life is incomplete, unfinished. If you are honest with yourself. chances are you will begin to intensify your sweet n’shamah and lighten your dark underside.

III. The experts say, “Retire to something, rather than from something.” We are admonished to look forward to the next phase of our active lives. We are admonished to look forward to the next phase of our active lives. From adding to the experiences of our grandchildren to stretching our minds in pursuit of knowledge; from mastering a new skill to coming closer to the beauty of nature, from reconditioning our bodies to kindling hope for someone who is lonely…so much we can do for others and for ourselves.

Perhaps you have a long-suppressed dream; a career direction thwarted by reality; a project forgotten as unrealistic; an avocational interest sacrificed on the altar of tending the practical and the necessary. Diane Nyad said it all: “You are never too old to chase your dream.”

I doubt if anyone here has a long-held wish of swimming over 1200 miles from Cuba to Florida. But it is always possible to grow and fulfill a wish.

You may counter my “activist” appeal with: “I ain’t what I used to be!” No doubt true. But the inevitable “qvetches” that accompany growing older, some mild impairment and even ongoing illness do not preclude adventure, learning, loving,
teaching, exploring, connecting with friends, making new friendships, finding stimulation for mind, pursuing a dream.

Earlier this week I received an e-mail update from a friend who is living with metastatic cancer. He is well aware of the prognosis. He recounted the struggle: on-going cyber-knife surgeries on his brain, a seizure, resorting to a walker to get around, fatigue. And then he quickly moved on to report his activity: with the aid of a colleague teaching a course and writing an important paper. (He is a university professor.); giving a keynote address at a prestigious conference. (It required a 40 hour trip); helping with the transition to people filling positions he has had to resign; traveling to celebrate the first birthday of a grandchild.

My friend is an exceptional human being. But there are countless everyday heroes who despite all, each day fulfill the words of the morning prayer “As long as I have breath I will thank God” As long as I can I will strive to find life’s beauty and meaning, I will continue to grow as a human being.

IV. In 1961 Abraham Joshua Heschel, an extraordinary Jewish thinker and scholar, spoke to the first White House Conference on Aging. The title of his talk is “To Grow In Wisdom.”

Heschel described society’s view of a working man (he was thinking primarily of men)… and the transition to retirement):

"... the individual [had been a] "machine for the making and spending of money.... The moment the machine is out of order and beyond repair, one begins to feel like a ghost without a sense of reality."

Aging, in other words, was equivalent to breaking down and being cast aside as good for nothing…And retirement, Heschel thought, encouraged people to live "a pickled existence, preserved in brine with spices." Their days revolved around recreation and entertainment--a developmental dead-end, lacking in social or spiritual significance. (Thomas Cole, Tikkun)

Heschel urged a different way of looking at the waning years of our lives:

“Old age is not a defeat, but a victory. Not a punishment, but a privilege. One ought to enter old age as one enters the senior year of university…in exciting anticipation of consummation. “
“Old age is a major challenge to the inner life; it takes both wisdom and strength not to succumb to it… Old age (must) be regarded not as the age of stagnation but as the age of opportunities for inner growth.” (From The Insecurity of Freedom (1966))

“Our task is to live with the flow of time, not against it. “

“As we get older,” Heschel declared, “we are increasingly called on to celebrate life, to know our place in the cycle of generations, to cherish each moment as a sacred gift from God--to grow in wisdom.”

Each day of our lives may we ask ourselves the right questions and grow in wisdom.

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