

Finding Purpose
Rosh Hashanah Eve 5772/2011
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I was gonna start with a joke...but instead – welcome home! Look around this place. I'm sure that's what you've already been doing anyway. I feel like when I was a kid and my room was redone. One wall bright yellow – one wall a way out orange/black/yellow plaid wallpaper, a very long burnt orange shag carpet, and a cool corner desk that was made in my dad's woodworking shop. This summer I drove by that home. I pointed out to my kids, "that double window in the middle of the back of the house. That was my room." They were, like, "wow...can I use your iPhone." There was no connection for them, it was never their home. It served no purpose for them...just a window on the side of some house that they had never seen before. And even though I conjured images of that yellow/orange/black room, the house belonged to someone else now...and that room had ceased to serve a purpose for me for over thirty years. Perhaps I had some nostalgic attachment, but it's not as if I'm going to design my bedroom that way now...

This sanctuary was fifty years removed from its original purpose. A mid 20th century Reform Judaism that was built upon a model that worked for that time – and, for a long time afterwards: Clergy up here, congregation down there, kind of non-approachable, small wall between the two. It served its purpose. But that changed. In the last 5 years, only the High Holy Days and B'nai Mitzvah were in this space – and not even all of them. Friday nights were in Maltz or the Chapel. This room lost it's purpose. With the changes made, it has been found again.

This past year, we, the clergy, have been really asking the question, "What can you get in a synagogue that you can't get anywhere else?" After all, with our technology so much can be learned, discovered, watched and heard. What's not there on line, what's not in our huge city of Los Angeles, what is it that can only be received here, in synagogue. I identified two things found here on a weekly basis:

1. Singing out loud
2. Reflecting on the week that was

Besides the shower, maybe in the car with a CD, or at a concert, adults don't sing much. Half claim they can't sing, the other half say they don't like to sing, and another half feels embarrassed to sing out loud. I feel that singing allows your body to vibrate inside, causing energy to flow...in addition, I feel like when I sing, it's very difficult to think – so that I can allow my body and mind to be cleared a little from the clutter of my every day thinking.

The other thing we get here is the chance to quietly reflect on our week. We are so busy, so scheduled, so wired in, so accessible, pulled all over the place. If we take the time each week to sit and reflect, I think it can lead to clarifying what was important and worth holding onto, and what may not matter as much in the scheme of things, and is worthy of leaving behind on a weekly basis.

Those two “things,” however, really are the instruments that are used for what is really going on here: The search for meaning and purpose in life. Two different ideas – meaning and purpose. And meaning itself is multifaceted. The first is that the synagogue is where one can create meaning in life’s moments. A place where birth, death, coming of age, marriage, can be made to really mean something. The other is the biggest question of all – what is the meaning of life. That question is huge. The meaning of it all. The greatest existential question in life. We’re not going to deal with either of those right now. But purpose...finding your life’s purpose, that is a different question, a closer question, and you have all you need to answer it inside of you.

I’m going to make an assumption. That all of us here fall into about four categories (I’m sure that there will be those that don’t fit any of the categories, but I’ve only got about 15 minutes):

1. People who feel pretty good about their purpose in life.
2. People who don’t really care at all
3. People who have never really thought about it.
4. People who aren’t really sure, or who feel conflicted with their original purpose.

If you feel like you’re in the first category. You can go now...you don’t really need to be here...although, what I am about to talk about may lead you to review your purpose, to recognize it more clearly, or realize that you are, indeed, in flux yourself.

If you feel like you’re in the second category. You can listen so that you have ammunition to argue against what I’m saying. Or...maybe think about yourself through a different lens for another ten minutes.

If you’ve never really thought about it, I hope this gives you pause to consider yourself and your purpose.

The fourth category, those who aren’t sure, or are conflicted, this will either complicate matters further, or present it in a way you haven’t considered.

I believe this is a kind of coming home, coming home to ourselves as it were, and it can either be like the window to my childhood bedroom, disconnected, a shadow of the past that isn’t me, or it can be like this new sanctuary, connected to the past and renewed for the now.

After scouring the two hundred million Google entries on finding life’s purpose, several trends became apparent. The first was that the question of one’s life purpose wasn’t limited to people just starting out as adults. There were articles and stories from all seasons of life. About retirement, about mid-life changes, recent graduates from college, people from all walks of life.

Another was that having a purpose – feeling a purpose in our personal lives – did lead to a longer and more fulfilling life (by the way, one study showed how attending a house of worship more than three times a month led to longer life as well).

So how do we do it? How do we find a purpose in our lives? Are there the “7 ways to finding your purpose,” or “5 secrets to life’s purpose?” And most importantly, for me, how is it Jewish? Does our tradition say anything that can help us understand finding purpose?

It can be found in the building of this sanctuary. When we began to work on this room and the adjoining room, we hired people to do it (although we probably would have saved money if we just had Cantor Kliger do it). Electricians did the electricity, painters painted, the Torah mantles were made by an artist specializing in sacred garments, the stoneworkers put in the Jerusalem stone in the front. In the Torah, when they were about to build God’s sanctuary in the desert – they refer to the workers in three ways at various times: Those that were filled with *ruah-elohim* – the spirit of God, *ruach-hochmah* – the spirit of wisdom, and those with *hohmat-lev* wisdom of the heart.

For me, they all mean the same thing. It is about what is it inside of you that you do well naturally, almost by instinct. If you were to think about an area in life, in the world, in your family, in your work that you are drawn to, that could be it. If there is an activity that gives you a feeling of well-being, something that, while you are doing it, time goes by so quickly, or you easily lose track of time – that could be it. It can be called talent, it can be called skill, it can be when you feel you are the closest to you that you can be, perhaps that could be it. That’s why I believe it’s like coming home. It’s coming home to your inner self.

I believe that all of us have something in our lives that is our *ruah-hochmah*, that spirit of wisdom that resides in our hearts – and only we know what that is, and when we feel it.

Discovering our *ruah-elohim*, our *ruah-hochmah*, our spirit of wisdom, the wisdom in our heart - That seems to be – among so many of the experts – one of the keys to finding purpose. Another way to imagine what I’m talking about is that these are passions, they are strengths, they are the things you care about and do well. Sometimes it can be related to work, other times it may not. But purpose is beyond economic consideration – indeed our happiness, as so many have come to realize over the last several years of economic hardship, isn’t about money, it’s about what we do, and with whom we do it. You may find that your purpose isn’t something that you do in your work-life, but something that permeates everything you do, and you want to do it even if it brings you no monetary gain. Or indeed, your purpose could be found inside of your work, and you can live your purpose and support your family at the same time. But the important part of this is to discover this passion, this strength, this *ruah-hochmah*, this wisdom of your heart.

That’s part of the work we do on the High Holy Days, search within ourselves to find what’s special. So then, what’s next, what should be done about it? The next step seems logical, and so many of the self-help books and articles identify that in order for one’s purpose to be realized, action must be taken. Here is where I cannot offer any help or suggestions. Every person’s road is different, every person’s *ruah hochmah* is unique, and how one pursues one’s passions, one’s uniqueness, that is up to the individual, completely up to you. You can seek advice from experts, you can read up on the subject of your inner purpose, you can come to synagogue to reflect on it. I can only offer a way of thinking about this action, and offer an approach and point of view.

One of my favorite moments in the Torah is the moment that Moses meets God at the burning bush. Moses asks God who he should say sent him on his life purpose of saving all of the Israelites. God answers that God's name is (and this is the only time in the Torah where God says God's name) *Ehyeh-asher-ehyeh*. This is a very strange name – *Shlomo* would have been a lot easier to digest. *Ehyeh-asher-ehyeh* is really a phrase, and it actually has nine different meanings, all based upon the verb "to be." *asher* is "what," or "that which," but the tense is ambiguous. *Ehyeh* could be I was, I am, or I will be. So if we took them all into consideration, it could be: I was what I was, I was what I am, I was what I will be, I am what I was, I am what I am (Popeye), I am what I will be, I will be what I was, I will be what I am, I will be what I will be. They are all true, at exactly the same time.

What we do at any given moment, is, for the most part, based upon something we want in the future. And yet, how we go about it, in many ways, is based upon our experiences in the past. Life always seems to be the interplay between what we've learned in the past leading us to what will happen in the future, and it is our actions in the present that get us there. Somewhere in that interplay lies our purpose. And the future can only happen, and purpose can only be realized through action.

Now, this process towards purpose and action is not a quick scheme. It will take real introspection, true searching. You'll have to look in the mirror, and see everything. And it's not going to happen overnight. But I think that the ingredients to find your spirit of wisdom, and commit to doing at least one action that allows you to use it can begin the journey.

But I also believe, that to be a Jew, this spirit and action must be stirred with goodness, with making the world better, with making other's lives better because of the actions you take based upon the wisdom in your heart. It can't simply be because it feels good, it must be because it is good.

Don't get me wrong, I think that carrying out your purpose will feel good. The longest study of human beings was the Grant Study. 268 men from Harvard were studied (including JFK), from 1937 until now. They were given surveys every two year, physicals every five years, and interviews every 15 years. The caretaker of the study, George Vaillant concluded in the end, "What we do, affects how we feel just as much as how we feel affects what we do." I imagine that acting on our purpose will have the effect of a feeling of self worth, satisfaction, a feeling of being at home inside of us.

So we return to this home and it's purpose. We dug down and looked for our ruach Elohim – and what we found was that we have a passion for prayer with different kinds of music, with study sessions that need people to see each other. We engage in rituals that are unique, and varied Jewish cultural experiences. That led to an action: we had a meeting. Six years later, this room received it's purpose again. Over the next ten days, I hope you search for the wisdom in your heart, and turn it into an action that helps you to realize your own purpose, the spirit of wisdom that resides in your heart.