

THE MEANING OF LIFE

YK 5777

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On this *Yom Kippur* day, I must confess to you all how difficult it was for me this year to write this sermon – to figure out what I wanted to share with you today. There are so many concerns that burden my heart: the ongoing violence in Israel accompanied by the continual diplomatic fiasco with the U.S. concerning settlement building, and the lack of any momentum in resuming negotiations with the Palestinians; How our world continues to be threatened by violence within – the ongoing violence within our communities between law enforcement and minorities, and by demonic forces from without – the continued threat of international terrorism; Then there's the growing disgust I have for the appalling tone and tenor of the presidential race and our politics... All of these issues have weighed heavily on me this past week... And add to that Hurricane Matthew – though we were spared from its horrific devastation, there were so many others who were not. It broke my heart to see news reports on the effect it had in Haiti, the Bahamas, and here in Northern Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas.

My heart is heavy, my soul is sad... I was unsure of what to share with you today. Perhaps sometimes we don't need to be talking about the complex issues of the day. The real *mitzvah* or commanding Voice of this day challenges us to confront the most basic of questions:

Why are we here, what's life all about?
Is God really real, or is there some doubt?
Well tonight we're going to sort it all out,
For tonight it's the Meaning of Life.

What's the point of all these hoax?
Is it the chicken and the egg time, are we just yolks?
Or perhaps, we're just one of God's little jokes,
Well *ca c'est* the Meaning of Life.

Is life just a game where we make up the rules
While we're searching for something to say
Or are we just simply spiraling coils
Of self-replicating DNA?

What is life? What is our fate?
Is there Heaven and Hell? Do we reincarnate?
Is mankind evolving or is it too late?
Well tonight here's the Meaning of Life.

For millions this life is a sad vale of tears
Sitting round with really nothing to say
While scientists say we're just simply spiraling coils
Of self-replicating DNA.

So just why, why are we here?
And just what, what, what, what do we fear?
Well *ce soir*, for a change, it will all be made clear,
For this is the Meaning of Life – *c'est le sens de la vie* -
This is the Meaning of Life.

Perhaps this is familiar to some – it's the opening song from Monty Python's "The Meaning of Life."

So instead of focusing on the issues of today, I thought I'd tackle something simpler...like the "Meaning of Life." I couldn't think of a better or more appropriate topic on this *Yom Kippur*, when we stand

before The Eternal Judge pleading to be sealed in the Book of Life for the New Year.

So, what will we do with our lives? What purpose do we have?

We learn Monty Python's answer at the end of the film when a character played by Michael Palin is handed an envelope containing "the meaning of life," which he opens and reads out to the audience: "Umm ahh, well, it's nothing very special. Uh, try to be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try to live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations."

There you have it – the "Meaning of Life" – avoid eating fat (in fact, we're avoiding all food today, at least for those of us who are healthy enough to do so); read a good book – you've got the Machzor in hand... And walking – need I remind you that throughout the Torah and Bible we are constantly reminded to "walk" in the path of Torah and "walk" in God's ways. And that leads us to the last two elements provided us in Monty Python's answer to a meaningful life – live in peace and harmony and be nice to all people.

So, instead of struggling with our own *meshugas* on this *Yom Kippur*, we should be thinking about “walking” in God’s ways, being nice to others, learning to live in peace with our fellowman.

This Day of Atonement is about being at-one-ment -- to be at-one with God, and with our self. The process of *kapparah* – atonement, is to repair the breach, to find the wholeness we have lost; to realize that peace, *shalom* (which, at its core, actually means to be complete or whole), can only be attained when we are at-one with the other.

We can never know peace and harmony, know *shalom* if the needs of the other, the fears of the other, the cares of the other are not at least somewhere shared in our hearts. True atonement is when we are together with and nice to the other.

How much does it take to care, to be nice to another? How much does it take to be human?

On this day we come to honestly ask ourselves, to what extent are we living up to our potential as human beings? This is the mandate of our lives. Not to succeed. Not to be happy. Not to win, or acquire,

or be healthy. Simply to be human. We Jews have a word for it. *Mensch*. And it means to care. It means to be nice.

So, how do we go about it? How do we become a *mensch*?

Let us turn to the wisdom of our Tradition, *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of our Fathers 2:5): Hillel would say, “*B’makom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish* -- In a place where no one behaves like a human being, you must strive to be human.” (Avot 2:5)

Such a simple and profound teaching. Profound, to be sure. But maybe not quite so simple. Today I will share with you four different ways to read and understand this text, their cumulative interpretation -- I hope -- will yield a more comprehensive meaning of what it means to be *human*.

FIRST At its face, the meaning is clear. In places where people fail in their humanity, you must step forward and be human. This is a lesson with which we Jews are well acquainted. We have lived in places devoid of humanity. We have endured the darkness, the isolation. We know what it is like to be marched through villages and towns as people simply stand by and watch. But we also know that there were those who were willing to rise above the fray, to stand up and

be counted; not that they did so in order to receive merit, but simply because it was the right thing to do. *Righteous Gentiles*. They have a very special place in our hearts.

Each year, when I take our Confirmation Class to Israel, we visit *Yad Vashem* – the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. We learn about the Righteous among the Nations. There are so many individual stories but let me share one story that speaks of the collective effort of one particular people.

After Hitler's rise to power in 1933, many Jews found refuge in Albania (population of 803,000; 200 Jews). It is estimated that 600-1,800 Jewish refugees entered that country from Germany, Austria, Serbia, Greece and Yugoslavia.

Following the German occupation in 1943, the Albanian population, in an extraordinary act, refused to comply with the occupier's orders to turn over lists of Jews residing within the country's borders.

Moreover, the various governmental agencies provided many Jewish families with fake documentation that allowed them to intermingle amongst the rest of the population. The Albanians protected their

Jewish citizens despite the danger to themselves of deportation to concentration camps.

The remarkable assistance afforded to the Jews was grounded in *Besa*, a code of honor, which still today serves as the highest ethical code in the country. *Besa*, means literally “to keep the promise.” One who acts according to *Besa* is someone who keeps his word, someone to whom one can trust one’s life and the lives of one’s family.

The Albanians went out of their way to provide assistance; moreover, they competed with each other for the privilege of saving Jews. These acts originated from compassion, loving-kindness and a desire to help those in need, even those of another faith or origin.

Albania, the only European country with a Muslim majority, succeeded where other European nations failed. Impressively, there were more Jews in Albania at the end of the war than beforehand.

It was Viktor Frankl, psychologist and Holocaust survivor, who taught that life takes on meaning only when we are able to be self-transcendent, only when we are able to extend beyond our selves

and care about others. In the words of noted psychologist, Abraham Maslow, when we actualize our potential as human beings, it brings *meaning* to our lives. But as the next interpretation of Hillel's teaching will suggest, the challenge to be human is more than just a process of the discovery of *meaning*.

SECOND In the Rabbinic literature of the *Talmud* and *midrash*, the word *Makom* is a metaphor for God. *Makom* literally means "place", and for the rabbis God is the "Place" of the world. God is our ground, the Place of our being. God is our anchor, the source of our footing. Read with this understanding, then Hillel's teaching points out that *B'Makom* - with God, *she-ein anashim* - where there is no human-ness (meaning, by God's very nature, there is only the holy), *hishtadel l'hiyot ish* -- we are the only ones who *can be* human. God cannot be human. Only we can. As such we learn that there is a reason why we exist. There is a purpose to our humanity. God created us *to be* human.

In Judaism ours as human beings is to be *shitufei Adonai* --partners with God in the process of creation. We are the saving grace of the universe.

In the Jewish myth of *Shevirat HaKeilim* – The shattering of the Vessels, The Ari, Rabbi Isaac Luria writes how at the beginning of time, God’s presence filled the universe. When God decided to bring the world into being, to make room for creation, He contracted Himself by drawing in His breath, forming a dark mass. Then God said, *Let there be light* (Gen. 1:3) and ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light.

God sent forth the ten vessels like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. But the vessels -- too fragile to contain such powerful Divine light -- broke open, scattering the holy sparks everywhere.

Had these vessels arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. Instead, God created people to seek out and gather the hidden sparks, wherever we can find them. Once this task is completed, the broken vessels will be restored and the world will be repaired.

God cannot redeem the world without us. Or better put, without a world to be repaired there would have been no need to create humanity. As humans what separates us from the other creatures is not our thumb or ability to walk erect but rather our ability to *live*

erect; to care for others -- to aspire toward the holy -- to become, as the Psalmist saw us, just a little lower than the angels.

THIRD There is yet another way to translate *B'makom she-ein anashim*. Literally. Rather than taking it in context, one could translate it for what the words actually say: *B'makom she-ein anashim* -- If you are in a place where there are no people, if you are in a place entirely by yourself -- you still have to behave like a human being. Alone in a forest, you are still commanded to act with humanity. To care cannot be limited to end results, to outward gestures, to social interaction. The essence of being human begins with a whisper, a *kol d'mama daka* -- a still, small voice that only we can hear. In solitude.

I think back to the Tom Hanks film “Cast Away,” about a sole survivor of a plane crash who finds refuge on a deserted island somewhere in the Pacific. Not surprisingly, it will not take him long to develop a relationship with a volleyball which he appropriately names “Wilson.” Even in solitude we have the need to be human. But the key to this interpretation, especially today, is not so much “even in solitude” but especially *in* solitude. To *act* like a human being is easy; to *be* a human being is hard. And while we might be surrounded by hundreds of other people here today, what transpires within the

recesses of our hearts is a completely solitary experience. Do we have the strength to be human even in silence? This is the challenge of *Yom Kippur*.

On this day, the day of our at-one-ment, God asks that in our silence, in our process of *cheshbon ha-nefesh* our personal accounting, we think not so much about ourselves but about others. God asks that we put our own problems in perspective, that we shelve our problems *in place of* someone else's problems, and remember that as human beings our ultimate responsibility is to care about others.

FOURTH And it is this interpretation that yields yet a final possibility: That it is only *when* we are in a place where there are no others -- including one's self -- that we are truly capable of becoming an *ish*. Which is to say, we cannot realize our potential as a human being until we subjugate our ego, our own, often-overpowering needs of *self*. Which brings us back to the very beginning... to be able and (more to the point) *willing* to look beyond ourselves and see the other - in every way possible.

To *become* human necessitates the ability to deny the often all-consuming **me**. If we hope to be able to be at-one with the other --

be it those in our world who are truly in need, be it those whom we love, be it the ultimate Other (the Only One of the Universe) -- then we must first stop looking at our self.

One day a rich but miserly *chasid* came to the rabbi. The rabbi took him to the window and said, "Look out there." And the rich man looked out onto the street. "What do you see?" asked the rabbi. "People. I see people," said the rich man. Then the rabbi took him by the hand and stood him in front of a mirror. "Now what do you see?" "I see myself," he said. Then the rabbi said, "So it is -- in the window there is glass and in the mirror there is glass. But the glass of the mirror is covered with a little silver, for no sooner is the silver added to the glass than you cease to see others but see only yourself."

Friends, that silver is all the ephemeral, shiny stuff that we bring in here with us today. It's all the stuff that gets in the way. Our worries. Our needs. Our desires. And it's so thin. It's so insubstantial. So fleeting.

Hence the great ironic truth of this day: We come here with the intention of examining our self so that we may become our self, yet to do that we must be able to see *beyond* our self. Maybe more than

anything else, this is what it means to atone, to be *at-one*. To be of one piece, integrated, reunited with our spiritual potential.

It was also Hillel who taught us that “If I’m not for myself, who will be for me?” He understood that our first responsibility is to ourselves. Self-preservation. We cannot count on others to care for us. But, as he goes on, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” Hillel reminds us that while the failure to fulfill the first part of his dictum raises a practical question (“...who will be there for me?”), failure to be self-transcendent, failure to care about others gives call to a profoundly more critical and existential query: *What am I?* Meaning: can I truly call myself *human*, or as our tradition would have it, a *Mensch*? And, of course, he concludes, “If not now, when?” To be sure, the command to be human falls in the eternal Now, but especially on this day, this *Yom HaKippurim*, this day of our at-onement. If we cannot seek the human within us, if we cannot seek the sacred potential in each of our souls, today, then when?

This day is given to us as a renewed opportunity. To ask the only question that matters -- am I living up to my sacred potential as a human being?

My friends, the answer to how to live a meaningful life is simple...

“*B’makom she-ein anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot ish*” -- simply “Be a Mensch!” If we can care for one another, be nice to one another, if we can seek to live with one another in peace and harmony, then just perhaps... just maybe... some of these other issues of our day and our world can be solved.

“In a place where no one behaves like a human being, you – **you!** must strive to be human.”

Amen.