

Does Your Life Have Direction Depth to Make / Content?

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Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

One of the paradoxes of our day is that many people who seem to have everything cannot handle their problems very well ^{at all} ~~at all~~, while ^{at the same time} ~~many~~ people who seem to have nothing are able to handle their problems easily. There seems to be something missing today in many of the more affluent people's attitudes toward life. The slightest upset renders them completely incapacitated. The slightest problem throws them off balance. On the other hand, there are other people, struggling for the most part, who seem to be able to take almost everything life throws at them. Nothing seems to faze them. Why should this be so?

It seems to me that the answer to this question is found in the last words Moshe Rabbeinu spoke to the Jewish people. The whole fifth book of the Torah, Devoreem, or Deuteronomy, is a record of the last words Moshe spoke to the Jewish people. Moshe concludes his speech with a poem. In this poem he sums up Jewish history, and he tells the people that any time they get into trouble, that any time they think that the problems of the world will overwhelm them, they should read this poem. Why did Moshe Rabbeinu exhort the people to read this poem any time the troubles of the world threatened to overwhelm them? Why couldn't he have just stated what he had to say in prose?

The answer, our rabbis teach us, is because it is the song of Judaism, the poetry of Judaism which allows us to continue. When the dream dies, when the song and the poetry are no longer there then Judaism cannot endure. If a person has a dream, a goal, he can endure everything, but if he has no dream or goal, he cannot handle even the slightest upset. We all know how much suffering the immigrant generation endured

in America. They, however, did not call it suffering. They called it sacrificing for the "kinder". Nothing was too hard for them. They wanted their children to get an education and to get ahead. They saved and saved so their children could get an education. Their children's education was bought on "Kishkagelt". This meant that the parents hardly ever ate anything except for a few basic commodities in order that they could save for their children's education. Today we see the same thing with the Vietnamese and other immigrant groups who have come to America recently. They have a dream and life's problems cannot get in the way of their dreams.

The trouble with many people today is that they have no dream. They have no goals that they feel are worthwhile fighting for. They are looking for instant happiness as if happiness can be bought. Happiness is a very elusive product because it can never be achieved directly. Happiness is a by-product of achievement, of successful relationships, of doing the right thing. Happiness can never be achieved directly. That's why on Rosh Hashonna we do not ask for the "Chayim Semecheem", "the happy life", but we ask for "Chayim Toveem", "the good life".

Life is not easy. There are many difficult things in life. G-d never promised us that we would not have troubles in life. He only promised us that He will give us the strength to overcome these problems if we lead the moral, the caring and concerned life. Moshe knew that the Jewish people needed a song, a dream, poetry if they were going to be able to overcome the adversities that lay ahead of them. He knew that many times they would lapse and think that they could buy happiness instead of earning it through deeds of kindness, love,

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compassion, and dedication. He knew then that they would have to refer to the dream, to the poetry if they were going to be able to survive. This, too, is one of the main messages of Rosh Hashonna.

One of the main customs of Rosh Hashonna is to go down to a river and to symbolically throw our sins into it. This custom is called "Tashlich". Why should we have such a custom? What could it possibly mean? "Tashlich", I believe, is teaching us that unless each of us have the characteristics of a river in our own lives we will not be able to be pure. Sin, the rabbis teach us, alienates man from himself. Sins cause us to become disgusted with ourselves, to lose our sense of self-worth, to become people who no longer have the inner strength to overcome life's problems. Rosh Hashonna teaches us that we can start over again, that we can overcome all adversity, but we need the characteristics of a river.

What are these characteristics? First of all, a river must move, it must have a direction, it must have a goal. Life is like a river. It constantly moves. People who fail to realize this and who try to live in the past always end up harming themselves and others. Life flows. It isn't static. Life is never a quiet pond or lake. A river is a symbol of a person's life, not a lake. A river, unless it is moving somewhere, would become a lake, not a river. Secondly, a river must have depth. Unless it has depth it will become a swamp. Thirdly, it must contain water otherwise it will become a dry riverbed. Unless a river has these characteristics of movement, of depth, and of content it cannot become a river. One of the reasons why so many people today are floundering, why so many people feel they need to take drugs or alcohol is because they have no direction in life.

Life becomes unbearable unless a person feels it is ~~leading~~^{going} somewhere. People who do not feel life's movement feel trapped and desperate. They do not feel that anything is worth sacrificing for. They cannot take the pain of ordinary life experiences. They have no goals. All they want to be is happy, but they do not realize that they cannot be happy unless they have goals, unless they have a dream, and unless they are willing to wear themselves out in pursuit of that dream. As George Bernard Shaw once said, "A happy person is one who can find a dream and wear himself out in pursuit of that dream."

A person must also have depth. Many times people have dreams, but they do not have the willpower to direct their energy toward fulfilling their dreams. They all agree on what life's goals should be, but they cannot channel their energies. They fritter their energies away hopping from one thing to another, always interested in the latest fads. They are a mile wide and an inch deep. These people, too many times, find life too hard to take because they cannot establish any real relationships. They cannot succeed in almost all ^{of} their endeavors because they are unwilling to commit themselves. They are afraid they are going to miss something.

Finally, a river must have water. It does not do any good for a river to have direction and a deep channel if it has no water. All it then becomes is a dry riverbed. There are many people who have enormous amounts of energy that they know how to channel and they do have goals to work for, but they have no knowledge. The goals ~~that~~ they have are not worthy goals. Their goals are selfish and many

times cruel and uncaring. Even after they ^{have} achieved their goals, they are miserable because they have hurt so many people along the way, and they have become disgusted with themselves. They do not know how to do the right thing, and many times they are unwilling to learn. The Torah is the water of Jewish life. It teaches us how to make the content of our dreams moral, compassionate, just, and caring. The rabbis constantly compare our tradition to water. A river must constantly be replenished. The water you see in the river this moment is not the water that was in it five minutes ago or the water that ^{will be} ~~was~~ in it fifteen minutes ^{from now} ago. That water has either gone downstream or is still upstream. Unless a person's store of Torah is constantly replenished he will end up to be a dry riverbed.

On Rosh Hashonna we blow the Shofar. When we blow the Shofar we first start with the "Tekiah". The Tekiah is the sound of ambition, of triumph, of power. It is a false note because it is the cry of untested power, untested triumph, untested ambition. The next note we blow is a "Teruah", or a "Shevorem". This is the note of man's inner cry. This is a note of "Tzores", of trouble, of affliction. After the Teruah we again blow a Tekiah, a "Tekiah Gedola". Many people cannot blow the Tekiah Gedola, the great Tekiah which comes after affliction. The Teruah stops them. They can go no further. Only if they have learned the lessons of Rosh Hashonna well can they go on to the Tekiah Gedola, the Tekiah which is greater and bigger than the original Tekiah because it is a Tekiah which has been tested. It is a tested triumph, a triumph which has overcome adversity. Rosh Hashonna is the holiday of hope. It is the holiday which says, "No matter what I have been in the past, I can be better in the future."

It, ~~through~~, tells each of us that every one of us must have a direction in our lives, that we must know how to channel our energies, and that we must know how to live lives of goodness so that we really can be happy and overcome our problems.

On Rosh Hashonna we mention the Exodus from Egypt. In fact, in the Kedisha Hayom, the special blessing for the day, we say, "And You gave to us, Lord, our G-d, this day of remembrance, this day of Teruah, a holy convocation in remembrance for the Exodus of Egypt." What does Rosh Hashonna have to do with the Exodus from Egypt? Pesach is the holiday which commemorates the Exodus from Egypt. Rosh Hashonna commemorates the creation of man. The rabbis are telling us that the Exodus from Egypt occurred because the Jewish people had a dream from which they never wavered, a dream which they tried to put into effect in their lives despite their slavery and, therefore, they were worthy of being redeemed and attaining a good life. They were able, because of their dream, to overcome the problems of Egypt. Joseph also, our rabbis teach us, was redeemed from prison on Rosh Hashonna. He was redeemed because he never gave up his dreams.

We, too, every Rosh Hashonna are given the opportunity to gain the strength to overcome our problems. All we must do is give our lives direction, depth, and moral content so that we, too, will be able to overcome all our problems. On behalf of my wife, myself, my family, ~~and the congregation~~, I wish you all a Gemar Chaseems Tova. May we all be granted a Happy, Healthy, Good New Year in which we ~~will not~~ ^{will} be able to overcome all our problems.

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On Shabbos Shuva we always read the Haftorah which begins *Shuva Yisroel, Return Israel*. That's where the Shabbos gets its name. This Haftorah is always read between Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur. *Shuva* and *Teshuva* are really two separate words. *Shuva* implies that you have done something wrong and must return. *Teshuva* has a connotation of replying, of replying to all the challenges at hand. Many times a person has not done anything wrong. He just has not replied to all the challenges that came his way. The opening lines from the Haftorah for Shabbos Shuva come from the Prophet Hosea. They begin *Return Israel unto the Lord Your G-d because you have stumbled in your sin. Take with your words and return to G-d*. The use of the word *stumbling* is significant. Most people never consciously try to do evil. They just sort of stumble into it. Nobody stumbles on purpose unless you are an actor or a child who wants to get attention. There are three different scenarios for the person who stumbles. The first is the person who, because of a quirk of his own personality, is more or less frozen intime. His ideas are ideas that were correct years ago. He is not sensitive to people around him or to different changes that have occurred. He does not realize that little children have grown up or institutions have changed or people have to be approahced in a different manner. Many times these people do a lot of harm by patronizing people or by not realizing that people have grown weak and feeble in old age, etc. Sometimes a person

like this never grows up. The second scenario for stumbling is that of a person who did not consciously do anything wrong, but then it comes to making choices and he inevitably makes a wrong choice. He is really a good man, but he cannot face the consequences of his actions. Isaac Balshevas Singer writes about this kind of person in his novels. A person borrows money and then he cannot pay it back so he steals, and then when in the act of robbing a store he is accosted by the owner whom he hits and then he runs away and is protected by a girl who is married, and he ends up committing adultery and maybe even killing the husband, etc. These are basically good people who just get caught. In those days people who did not pay went to jail. There were debtors prisons in the United States, too. These people just stumble into evil. Then there is the third type of person. The third type of person is the person who is just ignorant. He does not know what is right or wrong. To all these three types of people Rosh Hashonna and the ten days of repentance speaks. The word *Shana* in Hebrew has three meanings. It can mean *to repeat*, *to change*, and *to learn*. To each of these people the message of Rosh Hashonna is clear. To the person who cannot change, whose ideas are frozen (and we are not talking about articles of faith but about techniques such as we have here even in the Shul over all sort of decisions which have more to do with techniques than faith, i.e.

selling tickets, not selling tickets, what the role of Sisterhood and Brotherhood are, what to teach in Hebrew school etc., and unless these policies are rethought periodically Shuls die), who cannot relate to new things the word *Shana* is his directive. When the Temple stood on Rosh Hashonna we blew not only a *Shofar* but also a trumpet. The *Shofar* was the same *Shofar* every year but every ruler had to have his own trumpet. The trumpet of Moshe could not be the trumpet of Joshua. The Torah remains the same but how we implement it changes. To the second person who stumbles into sin not really meaning to the meaning of the word *Shanna* is *repeat*. It tells him that the eternal varities do not change. The person must never take shortcuts in moral matters. If you cannot pay your debts and had to go to prison you had to go to prison. You could not steal. You had to take the consequences of your actions. This type of person cannot stand the consequences of his actions. To him the meaning of Rosh Hashonna is *repeat*, the repetition of the eternal varities. To the person who is ignorant the meaning of *Shanna* is *learn*. This is his directive. Sinning because of ignorance can be prevented if a person learns. In the Torah portion Ha azinu Moshe repeats some of these same lessons. Too often people judge others by externals and not by whether they really are following the dictates of Judaism morally and in all spheres of their life. There is a sentence in Moshe's poem which goes *Bayishman Yeshurun*

Vayivat, and Yeshurun grew fat and kicked. This can also mean that the upright grew complacent and they spurned others. They became frozen in time. Nobody knows the whole truth and nobody can feel their ideas are 100% right. If they do they stumble into sin and will lead themselves and their followers into disaster. I am reminded of the story of the straight-laced guy and his friend who were playing golf one day. The friend putted on the first hole and missed and said, "Darn it, I missed." The straight-laced guy said, "Don't talk like that. It's not nice." On the second tee the same thing happened. The straight-laced guy said again, "Don't talk like that. It's not nice. If you do it again I'll ask G-d to curse you." On the third tee the same thing happened and once again the friend said, "Darn it, I missed" at which point a bolt of lightning came down from heaven and hit the straight-laced guy and a voice was heard saying, "Darn it, I missed again!"