Making Our Lives Count

Four High Holy Day Sermons

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Number Our Days To Get Us A Heart Of Wisdom

A priest, a minister and a rabbi meet at a clergy convention. They discuss funerals. The conversation turns to a question about their own deaths. They ask each other, "What would you hope to hear about you at your own funeral?"

The priest says, "I would hope to hear that my parishioners were always inspired by my homilies and sermons to live better lives."

The minister says, "I would hope to hear that the families I counseled found my advice valuable and brought peace in their homes."

The rabbi says, "I would hope to hear, 'WAIT! LOOK! He's moving!'"

Today is Day One. Not just Day One of the two days of Rosh Hashanah. Not just Day One of the year 5774. Not just day one of the month of Tishrei. Today is Day One of the rest of our lives.

Every person here has one ultimate fate. We are all going to die.

Like the rabbi in the joke, we often would like to deny that reality. We do not spend every day thinking about that common end that we all share.

But this is not just any day. This is Rosh Hashanah. This is Day One of the rest of our limited lives. During these Days of Awe we do contemplate our lives, and the end of our lives.

We learn in Psalm number 90 that the span of our life is seventy years or, if given the strength, eighty years. September 7, two days from now, is my birthday. I will be 71 years old. The question I ask myself is this: "How will I make the most of the time that I have left?"

Great thinkers through the millennia have posed that same question in different forms.

Aristotle said, "Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence."

In our own day the study of how to live a fulfilling life, how to become happier, has occupied an entire field of psychology called "positive psychology." One of the leaders in that field is an Israeli-born scholar named Tal Ben-Shahar. On the faculty of Harvard he was one of the most popular lecturers. His classes attracted 1,400 students each semester.

Professor Ben-Shahar has written three major books on this topic. The titles alone reveal why I regard him as the leading expert on our topic of making our lives as meaningful as they can be. The first book is called Being Happy: You Don't Have to Be Perfect to Lead a Richer, Happier Life. He also wrote Choose the Life You Want: 101 Ways to Create Your Own Road to Happiness. For our purposes, his best book is called Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment.

After Yom Kippur I am going to send to the congregation a bibliography of all the books I have had the pleasure to study as I prepared for these sermons. I will include these three.

Professor Ben-Shahar offers much detailed wisdom. Here is a sample, from his book titled Happier. He says,

> A happier life is rarely shaped by some extraordinary life-changing event. Rather, such a life happens incrementally, experience by experience, moment by moment. To make real the potential in your life for the ultimate currency of happiness, we must first accept that THIS IS IT. That all there is to life is the day-to-day, the ordinary, the details of the mosaic. We are living a happier life when we derive both pleasure and meaning while spending time with our loved ones, or learning something new, or engaging in a project at work. The more our days are filled with these experiences, the happier we become. *This is all there is to it.*

Professor Ben-Shahar provides an excellent guide to making our lives all that they can be before it's too late. This is the urgent question we all face, or should face. When we look at ourselves in the mirror, both literally and figuratively, we need to realize that life is short and death is forever.

That's the central message of one of the most successful men in business: Steve Jobs, founder and CEO of Apple. He founded Apple in 1976 at the age of 21. Apple's Board of Directors forced him out nine years later. They brought him back ten years after that. He proceeded to make Apple an even greater success than it had already been.

In 2003, Jobs was diagnosed with cancer. Initially it seemed that he had survived that diagnosis. In that period of his life, when he no longer believed his cancer would be fatal, he delivered the commencement address in 2005 to the graduating class at Stanford University. This is what he said:

> When I was 17, I read a quote: "If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you will most certainly be right." It made an impression on me. Ever since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?" Whenever the answer has been "No" for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.
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> Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.

The recognition that we will die, or an encounter with death that is narrowly escaped, can provide deep insights like that of Steve Jobs. Another such encounter had a similar result: the crash of USAirways Flight 1549 in 2009.

The plane had taken off from La Guardia on a routine flight to Charlotte, North Carolina. The end of that flight was anything but routine.

The plane flew into a flock of geese only two minutes after taking off. The engines sucked in the geese. First one engine, and then the second, lost power and died.

The pilot was Capt. Chesley B. Sullenberger. Fortunately, he had been flying with USAirways for more than 20 years, after a long career as a fighter pilot with the US Air Force.

He later wrote an autobiography providing details of his life both before and after the riveting events of Flight 1549. The title of his book is Highest Duty: My Search for What Really Matters. In that book he relates the following conversation with Kelly, one of his two daughters.

> When Kelly was very young, she once asked me, "What's the best job in the world?"
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> My answer to her was this: "It's the job you would do even if you didn't have to."

It is so important, he concludes, for people to find jobs suited to their strengths and their passions. People who love their jobs serve the world well.

Less than one minute after running into the geese and losing power, Captain Sullenberger realized he could not reach any airport to land the plane. Without hesitating, he turned toward the Hudson River. After gliding for another minute or so, with no power, he brought the plane to a safe landing in the river. Nobody died. Nobody was even injured.

Gerry McNamara was a passenger on that plane. He said later that he learned three lessons during that near death experience.

1. Cherish our families.
2. Keep our promises.
3. Be grateful for everything we have.

Cherish our families. For me this means more than our parents and siblings, our spouses and children. Cherish also all our dear friends and every person who is in our intimate circle.

Mark Twain wrote an article about Jews in 1899. Twain was explaining why there is no anti-Semitism in any of his writings. He summarizes the evidence for the proposition that, as he says, "The Jew is a well-behaved citizen." He begins this way:

> The Jew is not a disturber of the peace of any country. Even his enemies will concede that. He is not a loafer, he is not a sot, he is not noisy, he is not a brawler nor a rioter, he is not quarrelsome. In the statistics of crime his presence is conspicuously rare. With murder and other crimes of violence he has but little to do: he is a stranger to the hangman.

Twain then goes on to describe the Jewish family, reflecting the same value Gerry McCarthy placed at the top of his list. Mark Twain says:

> That the Jewish home is a home in the truest sense is a fact which no one will dispute. The family is knitted together by the strongest affections; its members show each other every due respect; and reverence for the elders is an inviolate law of the house.

The second lesson that Gerry McNamara took away from surviving the emergency landing on the Hudson River is a lesson also taught by Judaism: Keep our promises. That same requirement appears in Deuteronomy, which says, "That which has gone out of your mouth, you shall observe and do."

Because we have to keep all our promises, our tradition warns us against making promises lightly. One week from tomorrow night we will gather here for the service of Kol Nidre on Erev Yom Kippur. On that night and in that service we convene the equivalent of a Jewish court in order to nullify rash vows we have made to God. But only those vows. Not the vows we have made to each other. On the contrary. In that solemn ritual, we reaffirm that there is no escape from the promises we have made to each other. We must keep those promises. We are not absolved from them in the Kol Nidre service.

Cherish our families. Keep our promises. And be grateful for what we have.

We honor these values in our lives by daily attention. We are not likely to have a near death experience like the crash of USAirways Flight 1549 or a diagnosis of a possibly fatal disease like Steve Jobs.

Instead, we can be grateful every day. In fact, our tradition says that we should recite 100 blessings every day. Each blessing we say is an opportunity to thank God and to remember why we are grateful.

Today and tomorrow and also on Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur, we are considering how to make the most of our lives. How to make our lives count.

When should we start on this project? That I can summarize in a single teaching. It is from the section of our Mishnah called Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers. Rabbi Eliezer said, "Shuv yom echad lifnei mitat'cha." "Do all this no later than one day before we die."

His students asked him, "But Master, how can we take your advice? How shall we know the day of our death?"

Rabbi Eliezer responded, "Exactly. We do not know the day of our death. So we must conduct ourselves every day with the urgent realization that life is finite."

A short while ago we heard the blasts of the shofar. In that service a prayer is repeated. It begins with the words "Hayom harat olam." "Today the world is born."

That's true. Not scientifically factual about the birth of the universe. But perfectly true about our own world, the world of our family and friends and work, the world we control by the decisions we make in our own lives. That world is born today.

We conclude that prayer with the words, "We look to you for compassion when You declare our fate, awesome, holy God." That prayer concerns our fate in the world to come. It does not concern our fate in this world. We ourselves are the ones responsible for determining our fate in the only world we can be sure of, the world in which we live now. Praying for God's compassion in the world to come does not relieve us of the responsibility to make our own choices in order to live now the lives we are meant to live.

We cannot wait forever to enjoy the company of a parent or sibling or friend we have not seen enough. If we keep putting off spending time with the ones we love, we may find we have run out of time. Do it now.

If we have not yet fulfilled a promise, we never know how much longer we will have in which to do so. Do it now.

If we are envious of others, if we strive jealously to have what they have, then we deprive ourselves of the enjoyment of what we already have in the here and now and the gratitude we should feel for all of that. We must strive to put aside jealousy and nurture a sense of gratitude. Do it now.

Today and every day we can look at ourselves in the mirror and ask ourselves whether we are leading the life we choose to lead. And if the answer too often is "no," then that is the time to make choices for the improvement of our lives. Do it now.

That same Psalm 90 that tells us our normal life span is 70 years also conveys this lesson: "So teach us to number all of our days, that we may gain us a heart of wisdom." All of our days. Every day.

The numbering starts over again today. Today is Day One of the rest of our lives. What are we going to do about it?

For now, let us say together, Amen.

Overcoming Obstacles To Living The Life We Intend To Live

My theme during these Ten Days of Awe can be summarized in one phrase: “Make the most of your life.”

My rabbi in Newton, Rabbi Wes Gardenswartz, puts it this way: “Live life urgently.”

But what happens when life hands us a challenge? Suppose we contract a debilitating illness that sidelines us and leaves us weakened. Or suppose we lose a job and don’t find another for a long time, or we are still looking. Or perhaps we suffer the death of a parent or sibling or spouse.

After that happens, where can we turn to help us resume life with a sense of purpose? How then do we live our lives urgently?

The victims of the Marathon Bombing suffered sudden and devastating losses. It was a beautiful spring day. There was no reason for fear. The police had taken precautions to assure public safety. They swept for bombs the area near the finish line before and even after the first runners crossed that line. A cheering crowd was urging the remaining runners on to cross the finish line just a few steps away after running 26 miles.

Then, with no warning, the bombers exploded first one bomb and then, 13 seconds later, a second bomb. They killed three people. They wounded, with devastating effect, more than 264 other people.

The bombers had packed the bombs with shrapnel that included bits of metal, nails, and bearing balls. Their intent, and the result, was to attack the people standing near the bomb and cause maximum personal damage. Fourteen victims had legs amputated.

Jeff Bauman was standing right beside one of the bombs when it exploded, devastating both of his legs.

Minutes before the bombs blew up, Jeff looked into the eyes of one of the bombers. Jeff had been waiting among the crowd for his girlfriend, Erin Hurley, to cross the finish line. A man wearing a cap, sunglasses and a black jacket over a hooded sweatshirt looked at Jeff, then dropped a bag at his feet.

Two and a half minutes later, the bag exploded, tearing Jeff’s legs apart. A picture of him in a wheelchair, bloodied and ashen, was broadcast around the world as Jeff was rushed to Boston Medical Center. He lost both legs below the knee.

Jeff lost consciousness within minutes of the attack. As soon as he woke up, the first thing he did was to ask for pencil and paper. He wrote a note to the FBI. His note said, "Bag. Saw the guy. Looked right at me."

Jeff provided a detailed description of the suspect. His determination to help was a significant factor in the speed with which the authorities identified and located the two suspects.

Now Jeff has had to learn how to continue with his life, to move on from that horrific event. What can we learn from Jeff Bauman?

The first lesson about recovering from a loss is this: we must rely upon the people around us and trust them.

After the blast, Bauman was writhing in pain on the ground. A man named Allan Panter rushed to his side. Panter was an emergency room physician from Gainesville, Georgia. He pulled Bauman from the pile of bodies, tied a tourniquet around his right leg, and placed a jacket on him.

Moments later a man in a cowboy hat named Carlos Arredondo came bounding toward him. Arredondo called for help. A woman brought over a wheelchair. Arredondo and Panter lifted Bauman into the chair. Off Bauman went, with Arredondo running by his side.

The medical tent was a madhouse, but Bauman got help there to stabilize him. An ambulance took him to Boston Medical Center. The doctors operated to save his life. But they had to amputate both legs.

Bauman went from there to Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital. His girlfriend, Erin, has been with him every day since then. They are planning to marry.

All of these people have helped Jeff Bauman: his girlfriend, his mother, the rescuers at the scene, the medical staffs, and the people now guiding him as he struggles to learn to use artificial legs and walk again and rebuild his life. Jeff Bauman's story suggests one answer to our question: we make our way through trouble by relying on other people to help us.

In order to do that, we need to be open to letting others know our needs. This is the second way through trouble: tell others what you need so they can help you.

Everyone here this morning is fortunate to belong to a community of people ready to help when we need help. Every Shabbat morning during our Torah service we say a misheberach, a prayer for healing, listing all the members of the community who are facing a challenge to their health. When we hear those names, we can reach out to them and to their families to offer our help.

Our friends will help us through adversity if we will allow them to know our need. I am urging everyone here this morning, please, call me or send me an email if you have any need we can help to meet. You can call my cell phone or email me anytime. The number and address are in every email I send. You can also reach me by calling the Temple or visiting our website.

This is a warm and supportive community. We will help each other when we know that help is needed. The help of a community like ours is another way to overcome adversity.

A third answer to the challenge of adversity can be summarized in one word: resilience. When adversity strikes, we need resilience. In the words of Winston Churchill, "When you are going through hell, just keep on going."

We can learn resilience. That is the lesson of an article by Jane Brody in her personal health column in the New York Times. The title is "Get a Grip and Set Your Sights Above Adversity."

Jane Brody writes on all manner of health and nutrition topics. She has long been the personal health columnist in the Times. Time Magazine called her the "High Priestess of Health."

Around our house, Alice relies on food and nutrition advice from Jane Brody. Alice and I use Jane Brody's cook book for many of our meals.

Jane Brody's article on how to overcome adversity explores the value of resilience, which has many facets. Resilience includes the ability to weather stress. Resilience helps us to bounce back from trauma and get on with life. Resilience provides the means to learn from negative experiences and translate them into positive ones. With resilience we can muster the strength and confidence to change directions when a chosen path becomes blocked or nonproductive.

Resilient people find ways to cope. They set goals and achieve them despite such obstacles as drug-addicted parents, dire poverty or physical disabilities.

Being resilient does not mean living a life without risks or adverse conditions. Rather, resilience means dealing effectively with stress.

Until recently, resilience was thought to be an only an inborn trait, giving rise to the notion of the "invulnerable child." Experts now recognize that this is not true. We can also learn resilience.

This is a major conclusion of a book Jane Brody reviews in her article. The book is titled The Power of Resilience. The authors are Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein. Dr. Brooks is on the faculty of Harvard Medical School and the staff of McLean Hospital. Dr. Goldstein has written or edited 21 psychology textbooks. Their book on resilience provides lessons in achieving balance, confidence and personal strength. We need these lessons because no life is free of losses and setbacks.

When Alice and I were planning to marry, long ago in 1966, she asked her rebbitzin in Detroit, Goldie Adler, how we could be sure we would be happy, given that we came from such different backgrounds. Goldie told us there was no way to be sure of that, and there would be times when we were not happy,

but that it wasn't about our backgrounds. Goldie instead told her, "Alice, nobody can predict whether you will be happy. There will be times when you are, but there will also be challenges and troubles and times when you are sad. Your question is not the right question. You and Van should ask yourselves instead, 'Can we be sure enough that we love each other to marry each other? We care about each other; are we also committed to take care of each other?' If you are sure of that," Goldie concluded, "then you will be happy together when life allows you to be happy, and you will support each other through the inevitable times of sadness."

Children learn to be resilient when parents and guardians enable and encourage them to figure out things for themselves and take responsibility for their actions. When Ray Charles lost his sight at age 7, his mother insisted that he use his good brain and learn how to make his way in the world. In the movie "Ray," we saw an example. She watches Ray without speaking as the newly blind boy trips over furniture, cries for her help and then struggles to his feet unaided.

That scene reminded me of one I experienced more than once when I was two years old. My mother and sister and I lived in the winter of 1944 in Ithaca, New York. Ithaca is a city of steep hills and cold and icy winters. I had just learned to walk. As we made our way together up the snowy hills of Ithaca, I would reach up my hand for my mother to help me. She would say instead, in a firm but encouraging tone, "You can do it by yourself, Van." I would slip and struggle and sometimes fall and cry. But I would get up again and go on because my mother insisted I could.

My mother reinforced that lesson by telling me about this experience more than once as I grew older. I suppose I was angry about her treatment at the time, but I've since come to see that her assurance that I could do it helped me to develop confidence in myself.

Children need to learn that they are capable of finding their way on their own. Parents who are too quick to take over a task when children cry "I can't do this" may find over time that their children are less able to stand on their own two feet, to take responsibility for their lives and to cope with unavoidable stresses.

The same applies to parents who provide children with everything they want instead of teaching them limits and having them earn their own rewards.

But even if these lessons are not learned in childhood, experts advise that it is possible for us as adults to learn to be more resilient at any age. The trick lies in recognizing our expectations for ourselves and others, ideas we may have had since we were children, and learning to replace those ideas with ones that place a higher expectation on our own capacities and less of an expectation that others will solve our problems for us.

When we have a low expectation of our own abilities, we may expect that no matter what we do, things will not work out well. In those cases we may assume that others must change for circumstances to improve.

So lesson No. 1 is to recognize that we are the authors of our own lives. We must not seek our happiness by asking someone else to change.

Rather, we should ask, "What is it that I can do to change the situation?" We must identify our low expectations of our own capacities and assume responsibility for changing them.

Here are some of the ways we can foster resilience in ourselves according to the book The Power of Resilience.

Nurture your self-esteem.

Be true to yourself. Do not try to be what someone else expects of you.

Focus on what you can do and tasks you can achieve.

Take an active role in your community.

Develop a new skill.

Learn something: a language, a new sport or how to fix a car. It matters less what it is and more that you master a new field or subject.

This last piece of advice echoes the lesson that Merlyn the Magician taught his pupil, the boy who was then age nine and would become King Arthur when he grew up. The conversation appears in T. H. White's book, The Once and Future King.

The boy said to Merlyn, "I am sad. " Merlyn replied, "The best thing for being sad is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails."

Change is frightening to people who lack resilience. But those who try to bring about changes in their lives can succeed in those efforts, and doing so fosters resilience.

And if a new path does not seem to be working well, change again.

Take a long, hard look at the people in your life. Consider abandoning friends who drag you down or reinforce your negative scripts. If there are some in your life from whom you can't escape, practice ignoring their put-downs.

As we begin a new year together, we can hope for a year of happiness and fulfillment, and also should brace ourselves for the disappointments and challenges the new year will bring. If we rely on our friends and our family and our congregation to support us in times of need, and also learn the skills to develop and practice resilience, then this year will, I hope, be a Shanah Tovah, a good year, for all of us.

Let us say, Amen.

Do What You Love

Jerry Leener devoted more than 30 years of his life to his work as an accountant. He was a respected partner in his accounting firm. He made a lot of money. But he was not satisfied.

Jerry Leener took early retirement from his firm. He was 58 years old.

He had devoted enough of his life to complicated spreadsheets. Now he had three simple goals. He wanted to contribute his time for the benefit of his community. He wanted no longer to have such a highly structured schedule. And he wanted to work with people.

Then he met Steve Sullivan. Steve is a battalion chief for an emergency medical services team. He learned what Steve and the team were doing. They were saving lives. They were working together to rush to places where people needed them.

Jerry decided to see what it would take for him to become a volunteer emergency medical technician.

Mastering EMT skills was not easy. The training was physically grueling. And the course took eighteen months. He was not getting any younger. But he hung in.

Now Jerry is 65 years old. Rather than sit at his desk staring at spreadsheets, he is part of an EMT group in Silver Spring, Maryland. He spends 30 hours each week doing this volunteer work. He says that doing this fulfills him "body, mind and soul."
Jerry is not alone. Many older adults are searching for new ways to find fulfillment. We are living longer and staying healthier than any previous generation. Our longer lives are a gift. It is a gift that provides more time for personal growth.

During these ten days of awe we have considered together how to make our lives most meaningful.

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah we heard advice from Gerry McNamara, a passenger on USAirways Flight 1549 who survived the emergency landing in the Hudson River, along with all the other 154 passengers. Gerry learned three lessons: cherish family; keep all promises; be grateful for all we have.

We heard also from Harvard professor Tal ben Shahar. He taught the course on positive psychology that was the most popular course at Harvard. This was his bottom line: this life is the only life we have, it is finite, and we pursue happiness through daily events, not once in a lifetime experiences.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah we considered the hard truth that life can throw up challenges to our progress. We thought about how we can respond when that happens, how we can learn resilience.

Today we will hear from three guides to making our lives most meaningful. As we begin this new year I know of no more important goal.

The story of Jerry Leener appeared in the summer issue of AARP magazine. It was the lead story in an article entitled “Imagine What Comes Next! Then Go For It.”

Next week I will send the congregation an email with a bibliography and a set of links to websites that will help us find ways to enrich our lives. The AARP runs one of the sites. They described it in the article with the Jerry Leener story. The program they provide is called Life Reimagined. Please take a look when you get my email.

Do you watch TED Talks on your computer? I love TED Talks.

TED, T E D, is an acronym for Technology, Entertainment, Design. TED is an organization that says it is “devoted to ideas worth spreading.” TED has posted about 3,000 videos at TED.com. They are talks of ten or fifteen minutes delivered by major thinkers and teachers at conferences hosted by TED. They are wonderfully educational and usually also a lot of fun.

The most popular TED Talk speaker is Sir Ken Robinson. Many millions of people in over 150 countries have watched videos of his talks.

Robinson is an internationally recognized leader in the development of creativity, innovation and human potential. Queen Elizabeth knighted him in 2003 for services to education.

He wrote two books on the topic of finding your Element, which is our topic. Robinson explains in his books that the “Element” is the role in your life where your natural aptitude meets your personal passion. When you find that role, whether it is work or family or learning, where those two qualities intersect, then you are in your “Element.” Then you are doing something that feels so completely natural to you, that resonates so strongly with you, that you feel this is who you really are.

The concluding chapter in one of the books is titled "Living A Life Of Passion And Purpose." Robinson asks in that chapter whether you hope to enjoy your life or just endure it. He then describes the findings of a palliative care physician. She is a doctor who provides comfort to patients during the last weeks of their lives, when they are no longer searching for a cure and instead are preparing to die. The doctor asked her patients whether they had any regrets. She wanted to know whether they would have done anything differently in their lives. The six most common regrets reveal for us how we who still have time can take action to make our lives more meaningful.

"I wish I had had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."

This was the most common regret. When people realize that their life is almost over and look back on it, they often realize how many of their dreams have been unfulfilled.

"I wish I had not worked so hard."

This was the regret of every male patient she helped. By working such long hours, they had missed the best parts of their children's childhood as well as the best years of their partners' companionship. All of the men deeply regretted spending so much of their lives on the treadmill of work.

"I wish I had had the courage to express my feelings."

Many patients reported that they had suppressed their feelings to keep peace with others. As a result, they settled for a life they did not want and they never became who they could have been.

"I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends."

Many people did not appreciate the full benefits of old friends until their dying weeks. It was not always possible by then to track them down. Many had become so caught up in their own lives that they had let golden friendships slip by over the years. There were many deep regrets about not giving friendships the time and effort that they deserved.

"I wish that I had let myself be happier."

Many people did not realize until near the end of their lives that happiness is a choice. They had stayed stuck in old patterns and habits. Fear of change had them pretending to others, and to themselves, that they were content. Deep within, however, they longed to laugh properly and have silliness in their life again.

Robinson concludes his book with lessons for having a more meaningful life. Here are three of them.

First, honor our dreams. He urges us to honor at least some of our dreams along the way. Take the opportunities we have, particularly when our health is good. Health brings a freedom very few realize until we no longer have it.

Second, we should value our own life and feelings. We cannot control the reactions of others. Perhaps people will react badly when we speak honestly about our feelings, but doing so raises the relationship to a new and healthier level. Either that, or it releases the unhealthy relationship from our life. Either way, we win.

Finally, value those we love. When people are facing their approaching death, they want to get their financial affairs in order if possible, usually for the benefit of those they love. But in the final reckoning, it is not money or status that really matters. In the final weeks, it all comes down to love and relationships. That is all that remains in the end.

In addition to the AARP and its program for reimagining our lives, and the advice offered by Sir Ken Robinson, the Talmud provides another source of wisdom on living a life of meaning.

Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, relates that Simeon ben Zoma used to say, "Who is rich? The one who rejoices in his portion."

We are granted only a portion of what we might want in life. I will have more to say about that tomorrow.

We can also understand Ben Zoma's wisdom in another way. Our lives are finite. They end. During the portion of eternity that we are privileged to live, let us find ways to rejoice in our good fortune that we are alive. Our life is our wealth.

Our second Talmudic sage is a rabbi named Rava. He said we will be asked six questions as our entrance exam for the next world. Rabbi Howard Jaffe has translated those questions into terms that are relevant to us today.

On this awesome evening of Kol Nidre, we can well imagine that we are about to experience the actual Day of Judgment. When that happens, here are the six questions we can expect.

Number One: "Did you conduct yourself honestly and with integrity?"

That is the not only the first question on Rava's list. It is also first question we should continually ask of ourselves. We should be concerned, of course, whether we are behaving with integrity regarding other people. We should also make certain to be honest with ourselves. Am I living the life that is the best life I can live?

This question is a version of a teaching attributed to Rabbi Meshullam Zusya of Hanipol. He was a Chasidic rabbi who lived in Eastern Europe in the Eighteenth Century. Rabbi Zusya taught:

> In the world to come, I will not be asked, "Why were you not Akiva or David or Moses?" Rather, they will ask me, "Why were you not Zusya?"

The second question on the most final of final exams is, "Did you set aside time to learn?"

We heard on Rosh Hashanah the advice that Merlyn the Magician gave to the future King Arthur: "If you are sad, learn something." Learning, however, is much more than the best antidote to sadness. Our lives are far richer and more interesting and valuable if we are lifelong learners.

We will also be asked, "Did you work to leave a legacy and to ensure future generations?"

For those who are fortunate enough to have children, this question directs us to raise them to be good people. For all of us, this question spurs us to consider what we are doing to help the next generation and the next.

"Did you seek to make yourself and the world better?"

This fourth question resembles the advice of the flight attendant giving instructions before a plane takes off. "In the unlikely event of a loss of cabin pressure, an oxygen mask will drop down. Place the mask over your nose and mouth first, and then help your child or any other passenger who needs your help."

We cannot help others if we ourselves are incapacitated. To be useful to others, we may need to acquire or improve skills and abilities.

But we cannot spend all our time in self-improvement and attention to our own needs to the exclusion of others. To lead a meaningful life, we must find the right balance between equipping ourselves and helping others.

"Did you conduct discussions openly and fairly and honestly?"

When we enter into conversation with others, we do well to remember that they may have a valid point of view even if it differs from ours. Such conversations are ways to greater understanding for both participants.

The final question on Rava's exam is, "Did you take time to think about the meaning of life and your purpose on earth?"

That is a question I imagine all of us confront from time to time. That question is particularly relevant as we end the old year and begin a new one. That is the question that has been the subject of my sermons on Rosh Hashanah and today. What is the meaning of our lives? What has been our purpose on earth?

I will address one further aspect of that quest for meaning when we meet tomorrow.

In this new year of 5774 may we find satisfaction and continual progress in our search for meaning in our lives.

For this let us say, Amen.

Rethinking What Makes Our Lives Meaningful and Fulfilling

Our theme for these High Holy Days has been choosing the life we mean to live. We have considered how we can make our lives count.

One of the Talmudic sages I quoted was Ben Zoma. His wisdom appears in Pirkei Avot.

Ben Zoma's advice asks us to focus on the parts of our lives that are good and rich and fulfilling.

Ben Zoma asks the question, "Eizehu ashir?" "Who is rich?"

This is Ben Zoma's answer: "Hasameach b'khelko." "The one who is happy with his portion."

Putting that advice in the terms of the 21st century, Ben Zoma's teaching is, "Nobody gets it all."

I have a story about a woman who lives in Dayton, Ohio. We will call her Sarah. Her story illustrates Ben Zoma's advice. Nobody gets it all.

Sarah was distressed and unhappy. In a couple of months she would be 68 years old. She was in good health. Oh, sure, she had the usual aches and pains of someone who has led an active life for almost seven decades. But her health was not the issue. It was her children.

Sarah decided that maybe the rabbi of her synagogue in Dayton could help her. So she went to see him.

Here is the story Sarah told her rabbi.

She said, "Rabbi, I've come to see you because I'm so sad. It's my children. I have two grown children, a daughter and a son. Jessica is 46 years old. She lives in Seattle. Jeffrey is 42. He lives in Washington, D.C. I have three grandchildren: one in college, one in high school, and one who will start high school next year."

"When my kids were young may husband and I had a lot of pleasure in having children. We got along well, or at least I thought so. The teenage years are not as easy as when they were little, but nothing terrible happened."

"Then they married and started their own families in Seattle and in D.C."

"After that, we rarely saw them, and now we hardly ever see them or our grandchildren. There's no open fighting among us. It's just that they are distant from us, both geographically and emotionally. They have not invited us to visit them in over a year, and the previous visit was six months before that. It's been pretty much like that since they moved away right after they got married.

"We do all we can to get close to them, but nothing seems to work. We call them, but the calls are usually short; they don't want to talk for long. We invite

them to come here to Dayton, but they live busy lives. It's hard to schedule a visit. When we do, usually something comes up and they say they have to cancel.

"I don't know much about the lives they're living. I don't know their friends or my grandchildren's friends. The most painful is that I don't really know my grandchildren and I never spend any time with them."

By this time, Sarah was crying and had stopped speaking. The rabbi had listened sympathetically. Now he offered her a tissue. But he wisely didn't speak yet about Sarah's distress. Instead, he asked just one question: "Sarah, before we talk about this more, I'd like to know more about the rest of your life. I know you work at Central High here in Dayton, but I don't know any details about your work. Please tell me about that."

Sarah brightened. She stopped crying, sat up straight and smiled. She said, "My work is a comfort. I love my work."

She went on with great animation to tell the rabbi about her work as a guidance counselor at Central High School in Dayton. She had worked there for more than 25 years. She helped students choose their courses and clarify their plans for college or for work after high school. Some of the kids spent a lot of time with her in her office. She came to know them well, and to care about them passionately. She rejoiced when they got accepted to college, and helped them through difficult times at home, including divorce all too commonly, as well as illnesses and the rare cases of a death in the family.

The students loved Sarah. For many she was the first adult the kids had known closely other than their parents. They could confide in Sarah and were eager for her advice. Some students would spend many hours in Sarah's office, just talking. Many students looked her up when they came back to Dayton. She treasured those visits.

Sarah told the rabbi, "The people who have the best jobs in the school are the school nurse, the school secretary, and the guidance counselors. Kids come to us with all sorts of issues. We can really help them. I get to think of them as my kids."

When Sarah had finished describing her work, the conversation returned to the topic of her relationship with her own children and grandchildren. The rabbi asked Sarah to say more about that issue.

Sarah said, "When I was a child, I had only one dream: to be a good mother. My own parents paid little attention to me. My father mainly teased me. My Mom never encouraged me to think I'd be able to do much with my life. I was sure I would do a better job as a parent than they did. I was thrilled each time I had another baby.

"Once the children were teenagers, though, we began to grow apart. Now I feel guilty and upset that I wasn't a better mother. And my children are proving that's true by not wanting to be with me. What's more, in just two years I'll be 70

years old. I know the Torah says that we are allotted three score years and ten, or maybe twenty if we're lucky. I don't have much time left. I'm afraid that there isn't time to repair the relationships with my children. My grandchildren don't know me at all and are already too old to care about me.

"I'm afraid, rabbi. When I die, I will never have had the relationship with my children and grandchildren that I hoped to have."

The rabbi then applied one of the important lessons we learn in rabbinical school about counseling: know when to refer. He suggested to Sarah that she might benefit from seeing a psychologist he knew named Dr. London. He helped her get an early appointment with Dr. London.

About eight months later, Sarah called the synagogue office and asked to see the rabbi. They met the following week. Sarah was not quite as upset as she had been in their first visit.

Sarah told the rabbi, "I want to thank you, rabbi, for setting me up with Dr. London. He was a great help. As a result of my sessions with him, I can begin to see that I have been successful in an important part of my life. I am able to appreciate the part of my life that has been worthwhile. I never achieved my childhood dream of being a better mother than my mother had been. But, in the first place, I was a good mother in the early years of my kids' lives. Since then, they haven't wanted to be with me as much as I would like, but that doesn't mean I was a bad mother when they were little."

"Also, for many years I've had a fulfilling role at the high school. The work I am doing is valuable, and I get pleasure from it. The school does not have any requirement that I retire at any particular age. I can go on doing my work with the children there for as long as I am able."

"I'm not the mother I thought I would be when I was a young woman. What I needed to do, and Dr. London helped me do it, was to rethink what has turned out to be important to me. "

Sarah found a way to reduce her sorrow by allowing herself to relinquish the dream of her childhood, to be an excellent mother as her entire identity. Instead, she could focus on the area of her life where she had both success and satisfaction.

Dr. London helped her see that we may not succeed in one particular area of our life. That might even be an area we thought when we were younger would entirely define who we would be. But we can enjoy success in another area. We can come to terms with the fact that success in every single area of life may be beyond our capacity. In other words, as Ben Zoma advised so long ago, we can be satisfied with our portion. Nobody gets it all.

For some of us, living the life we meant to lead means making a change from what we are doing and going in a new direction.

For others, though, like Sarah, that may not be possible. It's not only that she was nearly 70 years old when she began to meet with Dr. London. It's also true that we may not have control over some of the aspects of our lives that are distressing us and that we think we would like to change.

In Sarah's case, there didn't seem to be a way for her to get her son and daughter and their families to want to be with her more.

In other cases, we may face disabilities or diseases that are beyond cure and that limit us in ways that make our lives hard.

The lesson from Sarah's life, though, is that life has many aspects. If we are disappointed in one of them, we may be able to focus our attention on others where we can find joy and fulfillment. Nobody gets it all.

During these High Holy Days we have been considering together this question: how can I make my life count? What can I do to change what I am doing so that, when I reach the end of my life and look back, I will feel satisfied that I lived a good life?

For some of us, the answer lies in examining whether our job or the other ways we spend our time truly fulfill us and seem worthwhile. If not, then we can search for how to change.

But for others, there truly does not seem to be a way to make a change. Is there nothing to be done in that case?

Sarah reflected on her life and considered what she had actually done that had value and purpose. Doing that helped her to find meaning and satisfaction in how she had spent her life, even though she had not had the success in the role of mother that she had earlier imagined as the only one for herself. That perspective freed her to move forward with renewed energy as she continued to improve the lives of the high school kids she counseled.

Sir Ken Robinson advises us to find our element, where our passions and aptitudes coincide. Even as we consider that advice, I hope we can also celebrate and find contentment in the aspects of our lives that have been meaningful and rewarding. Nobody gets it all.

Let us find happiness in our own portion, as we continue to deepen the meanings of our lives.

And let us say, Amen.