

## Yom Kippur: The Unfinished Life Rabbi David Glanzberg-Krainin

What do Mark Twain, a writer, Gilbert Stuart, a painter, and Franz Schubert, a composer, have in common? The answer is that each is famous for producing an unfinished work.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, is considered by many to be the greatest American writer of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are required reading for most American high school students. Less well-known is *The Mysterious Stranger*, a story that Twain worked on periodically from 1897 through 1908. Twain created three different versions of the story, none of which were completed. Each of the three versions ends in mid-sentence.

Gilbert Stuart was an American painter who produced portraits of over 1,000 people, including the first six presidents of the United States. His portraits hang in museums around the country. But he is most famous for his unfinished portrait of George Washington—a portrait that is sometimes referred to as *The Athenaeum*. A little more than a quarter of the canvas is taken up with George Washington's portrait, and the remainder is blank. Stuart, along with his daughters, painted a total of 130 reproductions of *The Athenaeum*. However, he never completed the original version. Yet I am confident that each one of us has seen this portrait thousands of times. That's because Stuart's portrait of Washington is found on the one-dollar bill.

Franz Schubert was an Austrian composer who died shortly after his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. He finished dozens of compositions that are considered staples of classical music. Yet his most famous symphony was the one he referred to as Symphony No. 8 in B Minor—a work he started six years before his death but which he never completed. Hence the name we all know it by: The Unfinished Symphony.

One of the greatest American novelists writes three versions of a story that he never completes; one of the most universally recognized portraits in the world is an unfinished

portrait. A composer's most famous piece of music is an unfinished symphony. There is something universal—and haunting—about unfinished work.

Yom Kippur is the day we come to contemplate the unfinished work of our lives and the many parts of our being that are still in formation. But we can be undermined in this important work when we start from an erroneous assumption. We think that we are going to get it all right someday—that at some point, we will finally become the finished product that we have wished we would be. But then we come back year after year and see that we are far from finished. And that can lead to despair.

Here we are once again, opening up the *Machzor* and reciting the same litany of shortcomings and failings that we recited last year—and the year before—and the year before that. It is so easy to feel that the work of becoming the people that God has intended us to be will be forever unfinished—forever incomplete.

All the years that we have been working on being content with what we have; and yet still we are jealous. All of the times that we promised ourselves that we would be more patient; and yet still, we fly off the handle. All of the promises that we have made to make more time for the things that really matter in our lives: to put more time into significant relationships; to have a better balance between work and life. And still, less important things somehow get in the way. And so we come to Yom Kippur and we ask: Why bother? There are still so many obstacles—so many parts of our lives that are unfinished. And we wonder if we are even **capable** of change. Perhaps we ought to simply give up, we say to ourselves; perhaps it is a fool's errand to think that we will ever get much better.

And there is a second obstacle that plagues many of us as we contemplate the unfinished work of our lives. For some of us, resignation comes from the belief that we have One Big Problem, and that **if, if only** we could fix it, **well then** our lives would be perfect. The **if/only** perfection sounds something like this: If only my adult child who is single and struggling could find his or her way; somebody to love, a job that engaged him or her, then life would be perfect. If only my loved one's health could get better, then life would be perfect. If only we had financial security, then life would be perfect. There is mostly a beautiful book; but some

chapters are missing. There is mostly a beautiful portrait; but the bottom part of the canvas is missing. There is mostly a symphony; but some of the notes are not there. So what will we do about the imperfections in our lives—the personal growth that does not happen, the dreams that slip away unfulfilled, the One Big Problem that we cannot solve? How do we avoid focusing on what we lack—rather than on what we **have**?

Our Jewish tradition has something comforting to say about our unfinished work and about the **if/only** dreams that we **think** are the obstacles to the lives we desire. It is perhaps surprising to realize, but the paradigmatic story of the Jewish people is in fact an unfinished one—even though we usually think of it as a done deal.

The story I am referring to is the Exodus from Egypt. It is the foundational story of the Jewish people. We remember it as a great gift that God has given us. There is no more important purpose to Jewish life than *Yitziat Mitzrayim*—the process of being liberated from slavery in Egypt. We devote the entire eight days of Passover to the story of leaving Egypt. Every time we recite the *Kiddush* on Shabbat we say *zekher l'yitziat Mitzrayim*—we affirm that this celebration of the sanctity of the Sabbath is a reminder of our liberation from slavery in Egypt.

And yet, there is more to the story. Rabbi Micah Goodman who teaches at the Shalom Hartmann Institute in Jerusalem says that the story does not end with being liberated from slavery. Rabbi Goodman teaches that at the very end of the Second Book of Kings—a part of the Bible that most of us don't study all that frequently—that there is an important coda that we often overlook. At the end of the history of the Israelite monarchs, the Jews living in Judaea **voluntarily** choose to leave, and return...where? Back to Egypt!

Here is the quote from the Second Book of Kings Chapter 25: And all the people, young and old, and the officers of the troops set out and went to Egypt." After all the drama—and after the Revelation at Sinai; after the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness; after the kingships of Samuel and David and Solomon, where do the Israelites go? The Book of Kings ends with our ancestors choosing to leave the Promised Land and to go **back** to Egypt.

God's purpose is thwarted. God's work of art—a covenanted people in their homeland— is unfinished. What does this teach us? It teaches us that unfinished work is part of the cosmos. Even for God. Certainly for us. We are always **in the process** of being liberated from Egypt. Which means that the path to freedom is a process that always continues. Even our greatest leader, *Moshe Rabbeinu*, will die before the Torah concludes—looking over into the Promised Land—but never getting there himself.

And what that helps us to understand is that we have to let go of the idea of completion—the idea of perfection. There is no perfect book. No perfect portrait. No perfect symphony. No perfect life. Not one of us is going to make it through life unscathed. And often it is our losses—and the acceptance of fact that we will never complete the task—that gives substance and texture to our lives. And so, we will **not** attain perfection. But that's not the end of the story either. **[Pause]**.

Even though we know the work will never be completed, that does not mean that we have the luxury of giving up. *Lo alecha ha'mila'kha ligmor; v'lo atah ven horim ti'vatel mi'menah*. "You are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from taking part," teaches *Pirkei Avot*. Even though the task will never be completed; even though there is the One Big Problem that still tugs at our heart. We are not permitted to give in to despair and to say that I have no responsibility to get better; no responsibility to be part of making a difference.

Even when we feel inadequate and how far away we are from being our best self, even when we recognize how much work still lies in front of us, we are still called forward into life. That is the message of the well-known children's book: [The Missing Piece](#) by Shel Silverstein. I am sure that many of you remember the story. The book tells the story of a circle that has a wedge cut out of itself. The circle wants to be whole, so it wanders around in search of its missing piece. But since it is not perfectly round, it bumps along and rolls very slowly. And that very bumpy-ness gives the circle the time to admire the flowers that are along the side of the road. The circle has time to chat with the earthworms; to enjoy the sunshine. All the while, the

circle goes around looking for its missing piece. First it finds a wedge that is too small; then one that is too large. None of the pieces will fit and so the circle keeps moving slowly along.

But then one day the circle finds a piece that fits perfectly. The circle is now so happy. The circle is now whole, not missing a single piece. Now that it is a perfect circle, it is able to roll very fast. And now the circle rolls along so quickly that it goes too fast to notice the flowers and to talk to the earthworms. At first the circle is happy. But then the circle realizes that even though it is whole, something important is missing: it no longer appreciates all the life that is going on around it. And so the circle removes its newly-found missing piece and leaves it along the side of the road. The story ends with the circle once again moving along with a wedge cut out again—but no longer looking to become whole—as it once again savors the beauty of the world around it.

The Missing Piece is a story that reminds us about the beauty of our imperfection. So that when we come to synagogue on this Yom Kippur day and say out loud: “Yes, I have not really made all that much progress on this behavior; yes, it is true, I could have done a bit better in this part of my life.” When we admit out loud our human failings and our lack of completeness, it need not be a cause for despair. Silverstein’s book tells us that we are, in a strange way, more complete when we are **lacking something**. Part of what it means to be fully human is to become aware that with time—and with faith—that our missing pieces may allow us to more fully experience the beauty of our lives. Aware of what we have lost, we are better able to experience the blessings of what we have. And if we are fortunate, we will find that even though we are missing things, we are still capable of moving along, aware that life is to be savored, and convinced that we are defined **more** by what we have and what we do—than we are by what we lack and by our flaws.

So yes, on the one hand, we need to give up the quest for perfection because our lives, our book, our portrait, our symphony, our circles, will never be perfect—will never be complete. But on the other hand, we cannot simply be content with where we are at any moment. Or say to ourselves, this is the **best** that I can be. I am really **not** capable of more; I am never going to change. Because once we **believe** that to be true about our lives, then all of our

confessions on this Yom Kippur day, will, in fact, become an exercise in absurdity. So there are actually two tasks in front of us: Both to accept that we will never be perfect AND to strive to be better than we are right now. That's the beautiful dialectic—the exquisite tension—of this Yom Kippur day.

No matter where we are at this moment, there is something greater that we can be working towards. That is what the great Spanish cellist Pablo Casals meant when he did an interview toward the end of his life, in which he revealed at the age of 95 that he still practiced his cello three hours a day. The young reporter who was interviewing him was a bit incredulous: “Mr. Casals, you are 95 years old and you are one of the greatest cellists ever to live. Why do you still need to practice all of those hours?” Casals answered simply, “Because I think I’m making progress.”

And that is what we learn from the great German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, who grew up in a secular home, and so spent his adult life discovering the beauty and the meaning of Jewish tradition, one mitzvah at a time. He was once asked whether it was his custom to put on *t'fillin* every morning. And his answer was this: “Not yet.” Not yet, he said. I have not yet arrived at a place where I feel myself commanded or compelled to engage in that practice. Not yet. But someday, I might.

And that is why our Founding Fathers could affirm, when drafting the Constitution of the United States, that this new country that they were creating would also be an unfinished work—forever a work in progress. So that when they wrote the preamble to the Constitution, they could use these words: “We the people of the United States, in **order to form a *more perfect union***, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity...”

We cannot be perfect Jews nor perfect people; we will always have more to learn and more good that we could contribute. But we can become a little *more perfect*—learn a little more; volunteer a little more. We cannot be the perfect child to an elderly parent. We are not patient enough; we could call and visit a little more frequently. But we can work at becoming a *more perfect* child.

And we cannot be the perfect parent. We are never certain of the balance between imposing our values and letting our children find their own way. But we can become a *more perfect* parent. And if we are married, we can be less focused on our own needs and more aware of the needs of our spouses; we can become a *more perfect* spouse. And though we may never be the perfect friend, we can become a *more perfect* friend.

You see, when it comes to this Yom Kippur day, we have a truly important lesson to internalize. While there is still life, there is still hope. Not the hope that our lives will be perfect, or that we will live without flaws, or that there will be **no** missing pieces. Instead, we can hope that we will have the perseverance and the faith to become *more perfect*. We can work to become more than we have been. We can strive to do more than we have done.

Mark Twain kept writing, kept trying again, even though he finished in mid-sentence. Gilbert Stuart kept painting, kept trying again, until his last day. Franz Schubert kept composing, kept trying again, until his premature end. As long as we are alive to face this Yom Kippur and this New Year, the pen is in our hand, the canvas awaits, and the orchestra prepares for the symphony. This great work of art called **life** hangs in the balance. Yes, we know that the work will remain unfinished—perfection will **never** be ours. And yet it is time. It is time to become a bit more perfect.

May we each know strength and faith as we journey bumpily along the way. *Kein yi'he ratzon*—so may it be.

*G'mar Hatima tova*