

D'Var at Temple Beth Zion
5th Bar Mitzvah Anniversary – Lech L'Cha
October 12, 2013

My Hebrew birthday is Shemini Atzeret. Based on that Hebrew birthdate, I was originally slated to have the parashat Breishiet for my bar mitzvah. Since Breishiet and Noah were already reserved at my shul for other bar mitzvahs, I had Lech L'cha for my bar mitzvah parashat. I'm **SO GLAD** that I had Lech L'cha. It's a **BEAUTIFUL** parashat about a journey. There are so many ways to view this journey...and how to align Abram's journey with our own path.

My favorite perspective regarding journeys is something I learned from Rav Claudia who indicated to me that Lech L'cha can be viewed as "going into oneself". What does it mean to "go into oneself"? While each of us can pursue our own unique path into our self, I believe strongly that an overall objective of this journey is to be our best self and to enhance our connections with others.

Today I would like to share some thoughts with you regarding a path I have chosen during the past few years. I hope that what I share with you will be interesting and thought provoking for you.

As many of you know, in 2008 I experienced life-threatening cancer. Initially, the oncologists believed what I had was Stage 4 Stomach Cancer. I needed to come to terms with being at peace with dying. 7 months after the initial diagnosis, it was determined that I had 1 of the most highly curable forms of cancer and went into remission. After having gotten to a point of being at peace with dying, I had to re-adjust to the fact that I was not going to die and most probably would live a long life.

This very unusual and challenging experience presented me with an opportunity to dig deep into my soul to explore the narrow passages of my life. I explored hypnosis, meditation, therapy, a Mussar practice, and other modalities. By undertaking this deep exploration and being very open to new possibilities, I rose to new heights of self-awareness and transformed in very fundamental ways.

As a result of my journey the past few years, I realized how precious life is. I realized how precious good health is. I realized how important it is to be present in the moment. I realized how important it is to rid oneself of regrets about the past and worries about the future. I realized how important it is to use one's imagination to explore life's possibilities – and to establish goals to achieve those possibilities. I realized how important it is to be grateful for what I have. I realized the importance of being resilient when facing life's challenges. I realized the importance of treating each interaction with others as holy and to treat others with tremendous respect. I realized that being a true friend meant showing sincere kindness and listening very attentively. I realized that understanding my mortality was a blessing so that I would view each day as precious.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned is that it is so very important to have meaning in my life. In Victor Frankl's book, "Man's Search for Meaning", he eventually concluded that the best form of therapy was to help clients understand the importance of having meaning in their lives. And, that such meaning came from a combination of one's interaction with others, from one's work/hobbies, and from handling adversities in life.

I would like to share 2 experiences I have had these past few years which have been most meaningful to me.

1 experience is my participation in Mussar which is a Jewish practice to elevate oneself to new heights of self-awareness and being one's best self. Through use of meditation, text study, sharing in class and in 1-on-1 Chevruta sessions, repeating certain phrases, using structured steps to change one's behavior, and journaling, I find myself learning, growing, and, most importantly, steadily evolving into a more ethical and balanced person. Mussar has 18 "soul traits" which are the basis of emotional/spiritual growth. Perhaps my favorite middah, or soul trait, is regarding Savlanut, or patience. In Mussar, it became clear to me that patience doesn't mean always approaching life's challenges with equanimity. It means that as we manage our difference of opinions with others, that the priority needs to be remaining **connected** to others (versus who is "right").

A 2nd experience is my decision to co-lead the Hesed Community at TBZ. Approximately 6 months ago Debbie Lipton and I decided to co-lead the Hesed Community. This has become extremely important for me. What I have found from this work (as well as from volunteering with Dana Farber and at hospice) is that people are so very vulnerable when they or their families have to deal with illness or death. In such situations there is no pretense. It is very real. The feelings are very visceral. This is when people need the support of others the most. This is when listening attentively and doing other acts of loving-kindness are so greatly appreciated. All of us at some point will be on the receiving end of Hesed. The Hesed Community at TBZ allows us to also participate as helpers to others. I and others have been on both sides and it has been **BEAUTIFUL**.

One final item that I would like to share with you that best exemplifies for me the spirit of "going into oneself" involves Victor Frankl. What I want to share with you today is something I learned in the past 6-12 months when I read an article about Mr. Frankl's life experience. He was developing his reputation as a leading psychiatrist in the late 1930s. By 1941 he was working as the chief of neurology at Vienna's Rothschild Hospital where he risked his life and career by making false diagnoses of mentally ill patients so that they would not, per Nazi orders, be euthanized.

That same year he had a decision to make that would change his life. With his career on the rise and the threat of the Nazis looming, Frankl had applied for a visa to America, which he was granted in 1941. By then, the Nazis had started rounding up the Jews and taking them away to concentration camps, focusing on the elderly first. Frankl knew that it would only be a matter of time before the Nazis came to take his parents away. He also knew that once they did, he had a responsibility to be there with his parents. On the other

hand, as a newly married man with his visa in hand, he was tempted to leave for America and flee to safety.

As Anna Redsand recounts in her biography of Frankl, he was at a loss for what to do, so he set out for St. Stephan's Cathedral to clear his head. Listening to the organ music, he repeatedly asked himself, "Should I leave my parents behind? Should I say goodbye and leave them to their fate?" He was looking for a "hint from heaven".

When he returned home, he found it. A piece of marble was lying on the table. His father explained that it was rubble of a nearby synagogue that the Nazis had destroyed. It contained a fragment of 1 of the Ten Commandments – the one about honoring your father and mother. With that, Frankl decided to stay in Vienna and forgo whatever opportunities for safety and career advancement awaited him in the U.S. He put aside his individual pursuits to serve his family, and later, to serve other inmates in the camps.

The wisdom Frankl derived from his experiences there, in the middle of unimaginable human suffering, is just as relevant now as it was then. "Being human always points, and is directed, to something or someone, other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is".

By putting aside our selfish interests and serving someone or something larger than ourselves – by devoting our lives to "giving" rather than "taking" – we are not only expressing our fundamental humanity, but we are also acknowledging that there is more to the good life than the pursuit of simple happiness.