

RHI

My Favorite Year

Har Shalom 2021

In 1982, noted Hollywood director Richard Benjamin brought to screen, perhaps one of my favorite movies of all times, a movie called “My Favorite Year” starring Peter O’Toole. The plot of the movie revolves around Benjy Stone, an aspiring comedy writer recalling HIS favorite year 1954, the year he met his idol, the swashbuckling actor Alan Swan, inspired by Errol Flynn.

This movie has almost nothing to do with the High Holy Days and Rosh Hashana, except perhaps, the title: My Favorite Year.

I think that almost no one here today, would call these past two years “our favorite years”. With this horrible pandemic, politics, war, the fall of Afghanistan, earthquakes, climate change and the list goes on and on, we would all have to think long and hard, before calling this past year “our favorite” one.

And yet, thinking long and hard is something we are all called to do leading up to these days.

I've been doing a lot of that myself, trying to make sense of these past 12 months and what does it all mean...how can I survive?

*My rabbi and teacher professor David Golinkin in an amazing lecture outlined 3 of which he called the Essential Jewish Values for survival in times of distress, and as I study these values and how they have applied to this past year, I want to make the bold statement that this past year has been, **My Favorite Year.***

Channeling comedian Joan Rivers..."can we talk?"

Can we talk about the lockdown, remember that?

A few days ago a friend of mine told me the joke about the husband who after a few months of lockdown, says to his wife, "well dear, I think we've decided that we don't want any children."

To which she says, "I agree but I guess we have to tell the kids tonight."

Many of us were going crazy from being at home for such long periods of time, some with young children.

Being locked down surely gave us all a different perspective about our lives, our relationships, and our connection with this holy community.

And that, perhaps is a good place to speak about this first essential value: **the value of humility in Hebrew *anava***

I think that the tendency of modern man, especially modern people in Western society, is to think that we're in charge.

You may recall there was a sitcom in the 1980s called *Charles in Charge*, which I never saw. I just remember the title of the sitcom.

My friends, we may think that we're in charge. Well, if this year taught us nothing else, it is that “We're not in charge”.

God is in charge of the universe. We are indeed very small, very, very small pieces of that incredible universe which we are part of.

This is of course one of the themes of the holidays before the musaf service, the Hazan, gets up and sings the prayer Hineni.

(If you are still awake for Musaf you'll hear it).

What is the purpose of this prayer? The purpose of this prayer is to say “I’m not really very important. I don't know why I've been chosen to represent the Jewish people in prayer. I'm not really worthy of it. I'm not smart enough. I'm not old enough. I'm not learning enough. Yet, I hope that nonetheless God will accept our prayers and forgive the Jewish people in others.”

Think about it, the major poem before the musaf service on Rosh Hashanah, Is the hazzan saying I am not worthy of representing the congregation in prayer. **The message is one of pure humility.**

The very natural tendency of human beings is that when we succeed in business, or we earn a lot of money, or we do something praiseworthy, we say ha. Ha, it's me. That is why I have succeeded. But our faith says: “it's not because of you, its because of God. “

A famous Talmudic story tell us of Titus and a Mosquito. Titus was the Roman general who destroyed the Second Temple, and this story describes in great detail exactly what he did.

The story in the Talmud tells us that he went into the Holy of Holies in the temple and he took a harlot. And he lay with her in the Holy of Holies.

And then he gathers up all the utensils of the Holy of Holies in a curtain and he puts them on board a vessel to go back to Rome. But then in the middle of the ocean, an algae springs up at sea, which threatens to wreck the ship. Titus arrogantly says “apparently the power of God is only over water.” He wants to drown me in water, if he is really mighty, let him come up on dry land and fight with me.

And, a bat kol, a voice comes out of heaven and says, Hotei Ben Hotei, Sinner, son of a Sinner descendant of Esau the sinner. I have a tiny creature in my world called a gnat.

Go up on dry land and make war with it.

And the end of the story proceeds to tell that this gnat went into Titus brain and banged away there for seven years.

And in our modern terminology, we would say that it turned into a brain tumor and it killed Titus.

The point of the story is that Titus, who is the most powerful general in the Roman Empire who went on to become the Emperor of Rome was felled by a gnat, the most powerful man in the World was felled by this tiny little creature.

Isn't that exactly our situation today?

The entire world is at the mercy of a virus that we cannot even see.

And just as the story of the gnat was to teach humility that even the

Roman Empire, the Roman Emperor is under the control of God, *so too*

we have remembered since last March that we are under God's control and we do not run the universe.

My friends, if ever there was a lesson from this past year, it is that we must maintain a sense of humility, not only in the high holidays but

throughout the year. Charles is not in charge and we are not in charge.

God is in charge and we need God's help and we need God's mercy.

The second value is to have an attitude of **gratitude**.

One of the most basic values of Judaism is that we have to learn how to say *todah*. We have to learn how to thank God and our fellow human beings, **not just to think our gratitude, but to express our gratitude.**

Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of *Treasure Island* and other great books said “the man, who has forgotten to be thankful, has fallen asleep in the middle of life.”

How many of us are asleep in life? How many of us forget to express our gratitude to God as we should. We do not thank our families as we should.

Why is this so? Why do people neglect to thank each other?

Why do we forget to praise God for his beautiful universe? For food, clothing, shelter? I think there are three reasons for this human tendency.

The first I already described as a lack of humility.

But I think it is more than that; when something bad happens, we blame God. But do we thank God for the good that happened. When good happens, we oh, I made a killing on the stock market. I got a doctorate. I

did this and I did that, but if it's a bad time all of a sudden it's God's fault. So when something good happens, we forget to thank God.

We tend to find in life what they owe to find.

If you look for positive things, you will find them if you look for negative things you will find those, as well.

Anyone ever heard of Ben Zoma?

Ben Zoma was a friend of Rabbi Akiva.

1900 years ago.

What did Ben Zoma say? A grateful guest says. "Bless my host".

How many wines he brought out for us?

How many portions he brought out for us? How many cakes he brought out for us...

and the ingrate guest says: what did I eat? One piece of bread 1 cup of wine. Everything he made, he made for his wife and children.

The grateful guests and the ingrate ate the exact same food, yet one utters nothing but praise while the other utters nothing but criticism. It's all a question of our attitude.

In a beautiful song by Irving Berlin what did he teach us?

If you're worried and cannot sleep,

just count your blessings.

Instead of sheep

and you'll fall asleep counting your blessings.

If we stop for a moment and actually count our blessings, we will be surprised to find that our blessings far outnumber our misfortunes.

It's not enough to think about the fact that we are grateful to God. We must express it in our prayers.

It's not enough to **think** about how grateful we are to our families. We must **tell them** so and often.

During our current situation as we grapple with the COVID our natural tendency is to gripe and complain.

“So many are unemployed. I cannot go to work on a regular basis. I could not attend shabbat services without a mask” and the complaining goes on and on...

All this is true.

But let us learn from Ben Zoma.

We, should be very grateful.

We have a government which is doing everything that it can to save every life, (not perfect) but let's be grateful. Doctors and nurses and thousands of volunteers test people and cure people and help people of every age in every religion - let's be grateful.

We should thank God that we live in this amazing country...yes, I said it...this is an amazing country - let's be grateful. My friends, what we need to cultivate in the year to come is an attitude of gratitude.

And the third value I would like to discuss was encapsulated in the following story:

One day a preacher had to do a funeral, but he got a flat tire. He opens up the trunk, takes out the Jack, fixes the flat, rushes off to the church, but no one is there.

He says to a few people sitting there "is a funeral over?" and one says, well, they're gone. He says what direction did they go? Where's the graveyard?

So the preacher says; “I reckon they're taking her to Oak Grove Cemetery,” so Reverend Sam jumps in his car, rushes out to the Oak Grove.

He saw a graveyard and way down the hill past the graveyard there were two fellows throwing dirt in.

He jumps out of the car, runs up the hill, looks down in the hole and says, well, I reckon I should say something since I miss preaching at this poor old soul's funeral.

So he says “ashes to ashes, dust to dust. We will remember this beautiful lady the rest of our lives, Amen. “

He runs down the hill, jumps in his car and rushes off to his next appointment.

Well, the two guys filling the hole are leaning on their shovel handles as they watched him drive off.

And says to the other. “you know, that's the first time I ever heard anybody preaching eulogy for a septic tank.”

I fear that many of us are suffering from the same syndrome this preacher was suffering. **We know that we want to win the race, but we forget why we are running.** We want to get there, but then we don't know where we are going or what we are going to do when we get there.

We frequently look and sound like the white rabbit in Alice in Wonderland.

Before COVID, everything was rushing cars and trucks in the street, all rushing not to waste time. We were rushing after time to catch up with time to gain time.

If anything good has come out of this tragedy it is that it forced us to stop running. It forced us to stand still. Not for a day, not for a week, but for many months we had to spend time with our wives, our children. We had to spend time with our grandchildren. We called people we haven't talked to in ages. We zoomed people we haven't talked to in eons.

We stopped running and we started thinking about the important things in life.

The third Jewish value is “to be” to stand still to think about what's important in life and what are the important things that we should think about and emphasize in the year to come.

Good question: In the year to come how can we turn the curse of this pandemic into a blessing? How can we use it? How do we turn this horrible pandemic into a blessing and help others throughout the world?

I have some thoughts and you'll have to wait until Kol Nidrei to hear them...

My friends, there are many, many values that I think we need to stress at this difficult time.

The value of humility. That we understand that we are not in charge, that God is in charge of the universe and we are very, very small particles within that universe.

To develop the attitude of gratitude, the art of saying Todah. We should thank God and our fellow human beings on a regular basis for all of the miracles of life.

And finally that sometimes we need to stop running, stop entirely, or at least slow down and rethink our objectives. Rethink our values and use the slowing down period in order to succeed even more in the future.

At this beginning of a new year, it is my hope that we will take these Jewish values with us, not only during these High Holy Days, but throughout the year 5782.

I wish you all a year, humility, a year of gratitude and year of just being.

Amen