

## **The Cure for Destination Disease**

Rosh Hashanah, Day 2

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The greeting card industry just gets better and better every year...especially when it comes to Jewish greeting cards. Long-gone are the days when you could only find the occasional bar mitzvah card with a sleeve for slipping in a few bills or a check. Nowadays, there are Jewish cards for nearly every occasion. Hallmark has an entire Jewish line of greeting cards called *Tree of Life!* I picked up a few random samples of Rosh Hashanah cards that I wanted to show you. Each one is like a work of art: this one is like a water color of apples and honey, this one has bright red glittery pomegranates, this one has beautiful leafy fall foliage, and this one has a round challah almost good enough to eat. Makes me want to frame them! I just want to read some of the messages...*Wishing you love, health, and happiness at Rosh Hashanah and always; Good health, great happiness, much sweetness; Good health, much laughter, great simchas, few tears...; Wishing you a year full of health and happiness...* Now, if you were paying attention, there was one wish that was common to every single one of these cards...and that was HEALTH! Those cards all had other wishes in addition to that but every one of them bestows good health on its recipients!

We're all concerned, particularly at this time of year, with health...ours, our family's and loved ones.' There's a disease out there that I want to warn you about today. It is part genetic, part contagious. It afflicts both men and women equally, and tends to strike most often around middle age--though there are many instances when its onset is even earlier than that. The effects of this disease are extensive, and systemic. It can cause your mind to shut down, your vision to become myopic, your dreams and ambitions to recede and even disappear. The disease I'm talking about is called Destination Disease. You won't find Destination Disease in a diagnostic manual or a physician's desk reference. As far as I know neither NIH nor the CDC have many studies on it. But it is real, it is widespread, it is even an epidemic. Jews, by the way, are not immune from this disease, and in some ways may suffer from it more so than others.

What is this ailment; this affliction called Destination Disease? It is the notion that at a certain point in life, you have exhausted your capacity to grow; you have maximized your ability to learn; and you have run out of opportunities to change. People with Destination Disease finished earning their degrees, accomplished their professional goals; they live in the house they'll probably inhabit for most of their lives; they've married, mated, and are cohabiting with a partner for decades; and a very common symptom of Destination Disease is getting up and doing the same thing every day, followed by coming home and doing the same thing each night. This is repeated for years, decades even without any substantial change or alteration. Listen to how the teacher, Ursula DeVane describes the difference between people who have destination disease and people who remain vital, in Gail Godwin's novel *The Finishing School*:

*"There are two kinds of people...One kind, you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very nice self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas, the other kind keeps moving, changing. That doesn't mean they're unstable. Ah, no, far from it. They are fluid. They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young. In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive."*<sup>1</sup>

John Maxwell, the bestselling author and speaker on leadership writes "when I meet someone for the first time, it only takes me about 20 minutes of conversation to determine whether his or her life is stale or fresh. The symptoms of an atrophied life are obvious: threadbare curiosity, tired vision, unimaginative vocabulary, dated and overused stories, and a slow, almost languid pace. People who have pushed the pause button on their personal development may someday be described by the fictitious gravestone that reads: "Died, age 45; buried, age 70." People who are fully alive, current, and vitally engaged with life are interesting to be with and have something to contribute to life and relationships. They provide stimulating conversation and insightful observations. Lifelong learning sustains interesting and growing relationships."

As a rabbi, I can often tell at what point Jews congealed into their final selves as well. Sometimes it has to do with their beliefs or their notions of God; although they are adults;

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<sup>1</sup>" John Maxwell on Leadership: *What I Believe About Success*," 2014

sophisticated, thoughtful, complex thinkers in every other way, the ideas they have about religion, about Judaism congealed somewhere around fourth grade. Not surprisingly, they often reject some of those pediatric ideas about God, or simplistic assumptions about the Torah, but they never replace them with more nuanced, developed, or subtle understandings. So the Judaism they claim not to adhere to or believe in is a Judaism they only have an elementary school familiarity with. They observe or don't observe the same mitzvot as they observed or didn't observe a year ago, 10 years ago, or even when they were children. There is no experimentation with religion, no adventure in their Jewish lives, no new discoveries of Jewish meaning or potential. They are the same Jews as they were last Rosh Hashanah, and the Rosh Hashanah before that. As the Kotzker Rebbe once said, "Who wouldn't want to be a good Jew? Someone who thinks he's a good Jew already!"

The good news is that there is a cure. And it begins with striking the word destination from any discussion about the things that are most important to you: your marriage, your career, your personal life, your physical, mental, and spiritual health. Talk about destinations when you're buying airline tickets or punching an address into Waze, but not in terms of your life. It requires a major adjustment in how you view the world: That success is not about arriving at one specific destination; instead success must be understood as constantly viewing life as a journey, an adventure. That there is always more to learn. There are studies that tell us that 50% of people, after they've graduated from high school, will never read an entire book the rest of their lives. They'll never take another course, develop a new talent, or learn a new skill. And although there are a plethora of adult Jewish educational opportunities every day and night of the week, far too many Jews never supplement their 4th grade Hebrew school education, or encounter Judaism's greatest thinkers or deepest wisdom.

The Torah spends a tremendous amount of time dwelling on journeys. Whether it's decades crossing a desert landscape or it's the constantly evolving understanding of an invisible, intangible God, the Jewish people are a people in flux, always on the move, both physically and spiritually. Listen to the story of Abraham and his father Terach. In Genesis chapter 11, at the very end of Parashat Noach, the Torah says that Terach took Abraham and the rest of his family, and they left their hometown Ur Casdim to travel to the land of Canaan. Why he did that is

unclear. God didn't tell Terach to move. Canaan hadn't yet been identified as the Promised Land, that comes later in Genesis. According to the renaissance commentator Seforno, Canaan had a long history as a sacred, holy place for various peoples, and maybe that's what drew Terach there. Whatever the reason, Terach packs his bags, gathers up his family and sets off for new horizons. But then, almost as soon as the journey began the Torah says "but when they came as far as Haran, they settled there." The mission was aborted. They went far enough. Now listen to what the very next verse says: *Vayamot Terach be'Haran*. Terach died in Haran. Was this his actual mortality or the death of his vision, his curiosity, his ambition? Whatever the case, Terach fades away into ancient history. But Abraham is not content to stay in Haran, some premature detour along the way. Abraham doesn't have his father's destination disease! He's got *schpilches*; he's got kinds of things to accomplish. Which is why the next thing God says to him is *lech lecha...so get up and go...El ha'aretz asher ar'eka...to the land that I will show you*. And that's why Abraham makes history, while Terach is all but forgotten about! And you know what...many years later, thirteen chapters on in the Book of Genesis, Abraham is now 137 years old. He's accumulated significant wealth; he has flocks and herds and servants; he's achieved some fame and notoriety. And then his beloved wife Sarah dies. The Torah reports *V'Avraham zakein ba be'yamim...And Abraham was old and advanced in years*. He's a widower; he's a success by any definition of the term. He's accomplished a lot. It could have been the end of the line for him too. But you know what, the man goes on to marry again, have 8 more children, arrange a marriage on behalf of his son Isaac to Rebekah, acquire the first legally purchased piece of land in Israel, and live another 38 years. The Torah then says he died *b'seiva tova zaken ve'saveia*, at a good ripe age, old and contented. Why was Abraham so satisfied up until the last breath he took? I think it's because, unlike his father, he never pushed the pause button on his life. There was always more to do. I know retired people who are busier in their retirement than they were when they were gainfully employed. I know widows and widowers who believe they can find love and companionship with another soulmate, and go off and travel, take classes, and enjoy their golden years with a partner rather than all alone. These are the kinds of people who tend to live long and accomplish what Abraham did...*zaken ve'saveia...they grow old and content*. And sadly I know people like Terach, who just can't seem to figure out why to keep on going. Those people do not know contentment even in old age.

There are a series of questions, the Talmud<sup>2</sup> teaches, that each one of us will be asked when we leave this world. One of those questions is did you dedicate time to study. *Kavata itim la'Torah*...Did you devote time in your busy, hectic life to learn? Did you join the conversation the Jewish people have been engaged in for millennia, or did that end after your bar/bat mitzvah? There are so many opportunities to make time for Torah...there are classes, but also podcasts; there more Jewish books available now than ever before and there are also on-line learning platforms. Here at the shul, we have classes in the morning and at night. In the building, and in downtown DC. In classrooms and in living rooms. I have always thought that kids would take their Jewish education so much more seriously if they saw their parents taking Jewish education seriously. If your son or daughter knows that between work, socializing, exercise, golf, whatever you also carve out time to study Torah, what an impression that would make! For a Jew, learning is a lifelong pursuit. Even a Jewish king was commanded to always have a Torah scroll at his side! Here he reached the zenith of power, prestige, and responsibility- -but he was still expected to learn and study on a daily basis!

I had a professor at the Seminary, Rabbi Dov Zlotnick, of blessed memory, who would stop me whenever he saw me and say, Mr. Raskin, what are you learning? I was taking a full course load of Talmud, Bible, Halakha, Philosophy, Jewish history...But that's not what he was asking me. He wanted to know what I was learning *lishma*, just for me, for my own personal Jewish growth, not what classes I was taking for a degree. For a Jew, to stop learning is to stop living. And in fact, science affirms this. Our brains are fully formed when we are about 25 years old. That's why we spend most of that first quarter century of our lives in school. But after 25, it's all down-hill from there! Certain parts of our brains actually shrink as we age. But there is one thing that neuroscientists tell us that remains, and that is the brain's plasticity. Even after its peak, the brain still responds to outside stimuli, like learning new things, new skills; even socialization keeps the brain alive. I had two grandparents live well into their 90's and both of them were as sharp as tacks to the very end...they took classes, played bridge, stayed involved with people, went to shul every week, read piles of books and newspapers...Neither of them was ever afflicted with Destination Disease.

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<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

Friends, as we look ahead to a New Year, I hope you get cured from whatever Destination Disease you may be suffering from. If your marriage has gotten dull, dedicate yourself to renewing it; if your career feels sluggish, do something to jump start it; if you're in a rut, repeating the same schedule day after day, make a change in your routine so that life feels like a blessing; more exciting, more interesting. And if you haven't re-examined your Judaism in a while, can I encourage you to take a class, to read something Jewish, to experiment with a new mitzvah in your life. Don't let your Judaism wilt and wither because you're not paying enough attention to it. There is so much meaning, so much joy in living an active, engaged Jewish life. Try something new, increase your Jewish repertoire this year...I know you'll be happy you did.

May God bless each of you with a healthy new year...health of body, health of mind, and health of soul. And if anyone needs a last minute Rosh Hashanah card, please see me after services!