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A story told by Rabbi Edward Feinstein:

There once was a very poor man, who could provide his family with only the barest, most meager subsistence. The family ate potatoes for breakfast. They ate potatoes for lunch. And for dinner, potatoes once again. The monotony of the potatoes and the poverty of their lives wore on him and his family, but they could afford nothing else.

One day the man found an old book, and inside the book was a map showing the way to the Island of diamonds. An island of diamonds! This must be the answer to all his problems. He would sail to the island, collect the diamonds, and return home rich as a king! And so he set out.

He borrowed a boat from a friend, took the map in his hand, and set sail to the Island of Diamonds. The seas were not easy to cross. Many times he thought he might be drowned by the storms and the waves. But finally one morning when he awoke, there on the horizon was a brilliant light — a light brighter than the sun. “It is the Island of Diamonds!” he thought, and he began to row furiously.

Soon the island came into view. And it was true. Right before him was a beautiful white beach, stretching as far as he could see, covered with brilliant diamonds. His heart leapt as he pulled his small boat ashore. “I’m rich! I’m the richest man in the world!” He jumped from the boat, carrying the dozen potato sacks he had brought from home, and began to fill the sacks with diamonds.

While he was busily packing the sacks with diamonds, the people of the island came down to the shore and stood watching him.

“What are doing?” they asked curiously.

“What do you mean, ‘What am I doing?’” he replied in astonishment. “I’m gathering diamonds!

I’m going to be rich — the richest man in the world!”

“Rich?” they laughed. “Those pebbles won’t make you rich! Why, the whole island is covered with them; they’re as common as rain.”

“If these won’t make me rich,” he asked in utter puzzlement, “what will? What is it that you value here?”

“Well,” the people responded, “there was once a fellow who found something much more valuable than those pebbles. He went up into the fields and came back with potatoes! Potatoes — now that’s wealth!”

“Potatoes? Potatoes are wealth? I know more about potatoes than anyone! Just wait here.” And with that he dumped the diamonds out of his sack and ran into the fields. Within fifteen minutes he had found a dozen potatoes. He returned to the crowd at the beach.

“Here — potatoes! And there are plenty more where these came from!”

“Potatoes!” The crowd repeated in awe. They carried the man on their shoulders from the beach and immediately declared him king of the island. All the luxuries of the island were brought to him. He was revered and worshipped. All he had to do was go into the fields and find a few potatoes each week.

After a year of this, he remembered his family back home and informed the islanders that he would soon be leaving. He set sail and faced the harsh trip home.

When he arrived in his home port, his family, friends, and neighbors turned out to meet him. Having been feared lost at sea these many months, he was greeted with tears and hugs. And finally his wife mustered the courage to ask, “Did you find the Island of Diamonds?”

“Did I find the Island of Diamonds! I became king of the Island of Diamonds!” he boasted.

Then, breathlessly, she asked him, “Have you brought us diamonds?”

“Diamonds? Heavens no!” he said. “I brought back something much more valuable than diamonds!”

“More valuable than diamonds? What could be more valuable than diamonds?” she inquired.

In response he hefted two huge sacks from the boat and spilled their contents on the dock.

“Behold,” he announced gloriously, “I bring you *potatoes!*”

His wife tried to make sense of what she saw. “Have you lost your mind? You went to an island of diamonds, and you brought back potatoes? We have potatoes coming out of our ears!”

The expression of triumph quickly vanished from his face as he recognized what he had done. He’d gone to the ends of the earth to find diamonds and returned with potatoes.

Resigned to the fact that she would never see any diamonds, his wife took the potatoes home and prepared them for dinner. While she cooked, the children played with the empty sacks. And as they turned the sacks inside out, they found there, lodged in the mesh of the bag, a few

small diamonds – diamonds that had not fallen out of the bag when the man emptied it on the beach. There were not enough to make the family rich. But those diamonds were worth enough to clothe and feed the family and, once in a while, provide something besides potatoes for their dinner.

(“Diamonds and Potatoes” in *Capturing the Moon: Classic and Modern Jewish Tales* retold by Rabbi Edward M. Feinstein)

As we join together this Erev Rosh Hashanah, we reflect on how we have in the past year, like the man in our story, lost focus of what is important and of what we value most. Wrapped up in our own lives, determined to fill our bags with potatoes, we pause to ask ourselves whether we have lived out our ideals and whether we have come closer to living the lives that we hope to live.

For some of us, the lives that we desperately hope to live are just not possible. The job that we yearn for is not within our reach. The person we hope to build a relationship with does not reciprocate our affections. No matter how hard we try, we cannot get pregnant, we cannot make our monthly mortgage payments, we cannot preserve our marriage. We had hoped to live long healthy lives, but the cancer returns. Our children do not succeed in the ways we had expected. A family member dies, leaving us without the support system we once had. This is the time that we look at the painful realities facing us and begin to accept what we cannot change. And so we make the decision to walk on a different path, come to terms with who we are, and find happiness in new places.

For others of us, the lives that we desperately hope to live really are possible, but we lose focus. We allow ourselves to get sucked into long work days and forget about our families, our friends, our communal obligations, our health. We distract ourselves by buying things that we do not need, hoping that they will bring us the happiness we yearn for. We succumb to the lure of alcohol and drugs, looking for reprieve from life’s challenges instead of confronting our addictions. We get swayed by the values and assumptions of our neighbors and lose sight of what is important to us. We become convinced that it is potatoes – not diamonds – that are valuable.

On this Rosh Hashanah we pause to reflect on how in the past year we have missed the mark, how we have hurt others and how we have hurt ourselves, how we have lost sight of our hopes and dreams. We engage in the slow, sometimes painful process of doing teshuvah, of turning towards our best selves. We ask ourselves: Where have I been and where am I headed? How will this year be different from last year? In what ways do I need to grow? How exactly will I refocus and become more compassionate, committed, engaged, present, and loving?

There is a precise time in our story where the man, boastful that he has brought back potatoes, realizes what he has done. Many of us, however, proceed indefinitely down the paths we are on with blinders on, unaware that we have lost our focus, unaware that we could – or should – be behaving differently. We make excuses for our actions, we tell ourselves that other paths

are not possible, we kick in our heels and insist that we are right. We never understand that in our determination to collect potatoes we have been blinded to the possibility of bringing back diamonds.

Or perhaps we reach a point where reality comes crashing down upon us. Our spouse leaves us, our job is terminated, our sibling lashes out at us, our child refuses to hug us, our house enters the foreclosure process. And then, we have a choice to make. We can proceed as we have done before, or we can change. We can pick up the pieces and vow to act differently. We may not, like the poor man's children, find any diamonds in our sacks. We may not be left with easy or palatable solutions. But we always have a choice in how we move forward. Will we take responsibility for our actions? Will we confront the parts of ourselves we do not like? Will we reach out to others for support and guidance?

May this year be a year for turning, a year for regaining our focus, for engaging in teshuvah, and for making things right. May we walk down new paths and discover new opportunities.

Wishing you a Shanah Tovah, a happy and healthy new year.