

## MAKING LIFE MATTER

### FIRST DAY OF ROSH HASHANAH 17 SEPTEMBER 2012

Imagine how you would feel if you had an important appointment – let's say – for a job interview – or a flight to catch for a long-awaited trip – and lo and behold – you overslept.

Embarrassment – consternation – anger – all kinds of emotions would presumably surge through your mind. In the interest of our polite assemblage, obviously I will not mention the words that you would probably be muttering under your breath at such a moment.

Many of us go through our year oversleeping – at least metaphorically. We are not as focused, alert, and self-aware as ideally we could – and should-be. We meander through the thicket of problems, frustrations and irritations that we inevitably encounter – and only rarely do we stop to see the “big picture.”

And then Rosh Hashanah arrives. Maimonides, got it exactly right when he said – as an introduction to the Shofar service: “Awake from your slumber . . . and rouse yourselves from your lethargy.” Why do we gather in such large numbers at B'nai Israel on Rosh Hashanah – and believe me – I am so pleased that you are here?

I believe that we enjoy the “reconnection” with our family and friends – we appreciate the vitality which our community projects – and we cherish the many traditions which are part of our Rosh Hashanah celebration. But on an even deeper level, I believe that we are trying to be more awake, more open and more willing than usual to step back – at least briefly – from the momentum surrounding us and reflect on what really matters. We are in search – and in that quest, we are surely in excellent company.

Long ago, the Psalmist asked:

“Who is the person who is eager for life . . .

Who desires years of good fortune?

Then, guard your tongue from evil – your lips from deceitful speech.

Shun evil and do good, seek amity and pursue it.”

(Psalm 34: 13-15)

The prophet Micah reformulated that proposition slightly differently: “You have been told, man, what is good – Tov --  
And what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, love goodness and walk modestly with your God.”

(Micah 6:8)

The word “Tov” -- good – in both these formulations clearly suggests that – just like our ancestors – we, too, are seeking a good life – much in the same way, as we wish each other on Rosh Hashanah – a Shanah Tovah – a good year.

Webster’s defines goodness as: “moral excellence, virtue, kindness, generosity.” We want to be good – and Rosh Hashanah gives us the opportunity to revisit that potential.

Goodness assumes many different forms – and, to some extent, is a function of our particular circumstances. But – at its core and independent of details, goodness is really about character.

Let me tell you – if I may – about Gac Filipaj. He had nearly finished law school in his home country of Yugoslavia, when civil war broke out, and facing conscription into the Serb Army, he fled to the United States as a political refugee.

Arriving in New York City with no English skills and no job prospects, Gac Filipaj found work as a janitor on the campus of Columbia University. He took that particular job – because in addition to paying him enough to support his parents and siblings back in a tiny village in Montenegro – the position allowed him to take classes for free.

Fast forward to the spring of 2012: after 19 years of juggling custodial duties with part-time course work – 7 years of English-language instruction followed by another 12 years of Ancient Greek, Latin, poetry, ethics and philosophy, now 52-year old Gac Filipaj donned his cap and gown to receive a bachelor’s degree in classics – with honors – from Columbia.

Commented Filipaj: “It was the happiest moment of my life.”

Listen to his typical schedule: He would arrive early most mornings – backpack over his shoulders – to attend class. At 2 pm, he would change into his blue overalls to work his shift at Lerner Hall – which would run until 10:30 at night. And then – it would be time for homework – taking the subway back to his apartment in the Bronx – and studying into the wee hours.

Gac Filipaj became a celebrity-of-sorts in the days leading to graduation. The media learned that he was still sending most of his earnings back to his family, that he had managed without a computer

until just a year ago, that he wrote his papers longhand and that he now planned to continue working – while pursuing a master’s degree.

At the graduation ceremony on May 13, Gac Filipaj walked off the podium onto South Lawn to a loud chorus of cheers – with the University’s assistant vice-president of facility operations there to embrace him.

In one of his interviews, Gac Filipaj commented about the most important lesson he had learned in school: “I thought that I knew a lot,” he said . . . “but I came to know that I know almost nothing.” His favorite philosopher? Seneca. Why? “Because his letters are written in the spirit in which I was educated in my family: not to look for fame and fortune, but to have a simple, honest, honorable life.”

(Columbia Alumni Magazine, Summer 2012)

Creating a good life for ourselves is not only about achieving our own goals: it is also about how we interact with others.

When General Colin Powell was Secretary of State, he slipped away one day from his elegant office and went down to the parking garage.

The attendants had never before seen the Secretary of State wandering around there and they thought that he was lost. He told him that he was fine – and that he just wanted to chat.

Eventually the conversation turned to the following question that Colin Powell asked the attendants: Because the garage was really too small for all the cars parked there – and the cars had to be stacked one behind the other – how did the attendants decide whose car would be the first to get out – and whose would end up as second or third?

The attendants gave each other knowing looks – with one of them saying: “Mr. Secretary: it goes like this: when you lower the window, look out, smile or know our name, you’re number one to get out. But if you look straight ahead, don’t show that you see us or that we are doing something for you, well you are likely to be one of the last to get out.”

At his next staff meeting, Secretary Powell shared that story – concluding: “You can never err by treating everyone in the building with respect, thoughtfulness and a kind word.”

Goodness is also about making a difference “out there” in our world with its multitude of needs. As Lynne Golodner was approaching her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, the PR professional, wife and mother of 4 from Southfield, Michigan decided to use the year ahead to do 40 things which would help others. She taught a poetry class at her

synagogue, she volunteered at her children's school, and she used her marketing skills to provide some publicity for a small start-up business.

Once while at the supermarket, Lynne Golodner spotted a veteran and thanked him for his service. She recalls: "he lit up – but I wanted to do more . . . so I left a gift card with the cashier to pay for his groceries."

Six months into the project, Lynne Golodner had already completed 30 tasks. "I don't plan to stop at 40," she commented "(because) this mission has truly changed the way I approach my family, my business and my life . . . and I want to keep the momentum going."

(Women's Day, March 2012)

Recently, Mark Shriver published a book which he calls A Good Man, Rediscovering My Father, Sargent Shriver. He writes: "My life in a famous and often star-crossed American clan would not be without its trials and disappointments, but I had as my father a man who not only was faith-filled and disciplined, but who also insisted in large part because of his faith, on the grace and joy in life . . . I saw it every day I was with him, though I couldn't articulate it this consciously – and – at least for me – usefully – until after he died."

A Good Man describes – as one would expect – Sargent Shriver's accomplishments in founding the Peace Corps and his involvement in Head Start, VISTA, the Job Corps, Special Olympics and other significant causes. But beyond being a curriculum vitae for Sargent Shriver, A Good Man focuses on those fierce qualities of commitment to family, country and God which were the essence of his being.

Even a 10-year struggle with Alzheimer's did not fully destroy Sargent Shriver. During one of his more lucid moments during that period, Mark Shriver asked his father what it was like to lose one's mind. His father answered: "I'm doing the best I can with what God has given me."

On the cusp of a new year with so many opportunities for goodness before us . . . shouldn't' Sargent Shriver's words become our mantra: "I'm doing the best I can with what God has given me."