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FIRST DAY OF ROSH HASHANAH

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As I sat at our son David's Georgetown Law School graduation this past May and listened to the commencement speaker - a scenario familiar to many of you - one phrase reverberated over and over again in my mind. After reminding the newly-minted attorneys of the various challenges which they would presumably encounter and overcome in the course of their professional careers, Grete Van Susteren summarized her message in an aphorism intended not only for the graduates, but, in a sense, for all of us:

"Make your life consequential," she said. It is not such an easy proposition. Given the frenetic unrelenting pace at which our society gallops, creating a consequential life is more daunting than ever before.

But I would argue: that is exactly the core mission of Rosh Hashanah - and deep down the reason that so many of us still invest considerable time, effort and energy in being here in our Synagogue -- in being part of our community - as we launch our New Year. Rosh Hashanah's radical claim to each of us is that with introspection, will and imagination, we can re-make ourselves, we can aspire to more.

A few years ago, Lee Kravitz, an editor at Parade magazine, got fired. He had been a work-a-holic and perfectionist - and along the way, had become increasingly "disconnected" from his wife, his children and his friends. Of course, he had the

predictable job-loss emotions of anger, embarrassment, humiliation. What is more unique, though, about Lee Kravitz's story is that he used the sudden unexpected change in his career trajectory to re-direct himself differently.

Before assuming a new job, Lee Kravitz spent a full year sorting through what he calls in his book about this experience - his "unfinished business." Like so many of us, Lee Kravitz had been so busy in feverish pursuit of his goals that he had neglected what was most important . . . and thus emerged "One Man's Extraordinary Year of Trying to Do the Right Things - " the subtitle of the book. Among the accomplishments: the repayment of a debt three decades old, making a much-overdue condolence call, finding a long-lost relative, letting go of a grudge - you get the idea - in total, ten journeys that changed how Lee Kravitz looked at himself and those around him.

In his own words: "Time and again, I became aware of how my "optical delusions" (had) created unfinished business for me . . ." Lee Kravitz concludes: "I might not have embraced the whole of nature - but (after that year), I found myself in a much richer place - that of true human connectedness." And yes, eventually, Lee Kravitz did find a new job - but one that gave him more balance and sanity.

On a trip to the mall in December 1995, Sari Gross, of Wayne, New Jersey and her children, Lauren and Bobby, passed a large Christmas tree decorated with angel ornaments listing the names and ages of those who could not afford any presents. The kids pressed their mom about how they could help - especially since being Jewish, they did not have a Christmas tree themselves.

Once home, Sari Gross, her husband, Steve, and the kids talked further - and an idea was born. The family decided that a paper flame would be an appropriate symbol for the holiday season - suggesting Chanukkah candles, Christmas lights and the theme

of hope. Sari Gross contacted local agencies for anonymous lists of needy adults and children. The family spent an afternoon writing each person's initial, age, gender and a potential gift on the flames.

At every opportunity, Sari Gross asked her friends, her neighbors, the congregants at her Synagogue, to adopt a flame that touched their hearts. 18 years later, Sari Gross expects to receive 1200 contributions for her "flames." From November on, her house is overflowing with merchandise. It all started, comments Sari Gross, because my husband and I needed to find a way to nourish our kids' curiosity and empower them to take positive action on their own . . . We realize that our gifts don't make life-changing differences for the recipients, but the gifts do make moment-changing differences (that matter)."

Last Saturday evening at our Selichot service, we presented a film entitled, "Nicky's Family." In 1938, Nicky Winton, a 29-year old London stockbroker was supposed to leave for a ski vacation. Instead, a friend, who was working with refugees in Prague, urged him to come there for a visit. Appalled and overwhelmed by what he saw in Prague, Nicky Winton realized that there was no plan to save Czech Jewish children from the Nazi barbarism threatening them. He decided to act and succeeded in persuading the British government to approve the arrival of the Czech children - if he could find them homes and provide a deposit of 50 pounds for each one – a significant sum for that era.

For 6 months, until war broke out on September 1, 1939 and children could no longer leave Czechoslovakia, Nicky Winton continued his work as a stockbroker by day - and as a rescue-agent by night, finding British families to "adopt" the children, raising the needed funds for transportation, and managing an array of complicated logistics.

Nicholas Winton saved 669 children - and remained in relative obscurity for the next 50 years. In 1988, his wife, Grete, found an old scrapbook in their attic - documenting Winton's efforts including names of the children and the families where they found refuge. She persuaded him to "go public." Soon thereafter, Nicholas Winton was invited to a very emotional reunion with some of the children on a BBC program called "That's Life" and eventually knighted in recognition of his efforts on behalf of the Czech "Kindertransport."

Vera Gissing, one of the rescued children, notes: "If Nicholas Winton had not gone to Prague . . . we wouldn't be alive. There are thousands of us in the world thanks to him." And Sir Nicholas Winton, now 104, provides his own epitaph. When asked by a class doing a history project for his advice, he said: "Don't be content in your life just to do no wrong. Be prepared every day to try to do some good."

How do we forge a life of consequence? There is no one formula. For each of us, the path will be different, uniquely ours - a function of our circumstances, our persona, our convictions and our determination.

On Rosh Hashanah, we are given the gift of starting that path anew.

The eminent 19th century preacher Phillips Brooks put it aptly: "The great danger facing all of us is not that we shall make an absolute failure of our life. Nor that we shall fall into outright viciousness. Nor that we shall be terribly unhappy. Nor that we shall feel that life has no meaning. The danger is that we shall fail to conceive life's greatest meaning, fall short of its highest good, miss its deepest and most abiding happiness, be unable to tender the most needed service, be unconscious of life ablaze with the light of God's presence - and be content to have it so. The danger is that we shall wake up to

find that we have missed life itself . . . satisfied too soon with too little - with a life that falls short of the best."

As the New Year dawns in front of us - with its challenges and responsibilities - with its choices and decisions - and with all its infinite potential and promise:

Say not: that life was good to me.

Say rather: that I was good to life.