

Rosh Hashanah 5780: Living a *Chayim Tovim*, A Good Life

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This summer, we watched as the world's most dangerous mountain climb became even more dangerous. And even though HotLanta was really hot this summer, I am not talking about Kennesaw Mountain which has an elevation of 1,800 (a good Jewish number). I am talking about Mt. Everest at 29,029 feet, during which 11 people died trying to summit this year. Bringing the total to over 300 who have died trying to get to the top.

Now, when Mt. Everest was first climbed in 1953, it was a moment for humankind to celebrate. It was a unique moment for humankind. Yet, because of the number of thrill seekers, today, Mt. Everest has become a tourist mecca, visited by 100,000 people a year.

We all know from the news how dangerous it is to climb Everest. However, it's more than just the climb that is dangerous: it's the price tag. The flights, hotels, guides, equipment, bottled oxygen, Sherpa, and gear, will cost you \$45,000. All for, according to the numbers, if you try to summit, a 1 in 10 chance of dying.

Now, people say it is expensive to be Jewish. Between memberships, education and donations. However, given Everest's price tag, I want to tell you that my child's Epstein School Tuition seems like a bargain. And I am pretty sure that Zev, who started Kindergarten, has a MUCH better chance of surviving that experience than 1 in 10.

Which begs the question I want to explore with everyone this morning: And that is: why are people still climbing Mt. Everest? What are people looking for, but not finding? And what is happening in our society that 100,000 people a year are paying an arm and a leg, *for literally the chance of losing an arm and a leg and more?*

I believe that in large part, our Everest obsession has to do with how we in our society have come to define what it means to live a *chayim tovim*, a good life. In his book *The Joy Of Missing Out*, Dr. Svend Brinkmann points out the pressure that society places on us to believe that a good life can only be lived by over-stimulating ourselves and by experiencing all that life has to offer. We are told that to live a life without climbing Everest, to heaven forbid miss out on anything, would be boring, to live a cheated life that was less than good.

Society tells us that to live a *chayim tovim*, a good life that we must do more and not less. On Amazon a search for books with Do More in the title, will give you with 13,000 titles. Yet you will only find 6 books with the title "how to do less." The most common tattoo that people get, although I must admit that when I read this in an academic

journal, I wondered if there was in fact a bureau of tattoo statistics collecting the data: Carpe Diem, go and seize the day, which is followed by the acronym YOLO, You Only Live Once. Both messages urge and encourage us to believe that it is preferable to do something that we might regret than not to do it at all.

We are told that to live a *chayim tovim*, to take hold of a good life that we must not miss out on anything life has to offer. And that to miss out anything is a sign of weakness, rather than strength. Of course, not all of us want to climb Mt. Everest. But isn't it the darndest thing that all of us create little mountains and obstacles on a smaller scale by defining goodness not by what we have, but by what are missing. When we don't get invited to a birthday party, when our child doesn't get into the college they want, when we don't get to an item on our bucket list we tell ourselves that we have somehow failed to live.

Because we are told by the world, that to live a good life, a *chayim tovim*, that the best treasure lies not where we are, but where we are not. And so we travel to Everest. We put at risk the greatest treasure of all, our lives, so that we can capture a selfie at the summit while yelling YOLO at the top of our lungs.

There is of course, nothing wrong with wanting to live a good life and going out and pursuing a good life. However, Rosh Hashanah, and Jewish tradition, it may not surprise you to find out don't talk about a *chayim tovim*, living a good life in the way that our society has chosen to redefine it: rushing after things, and brooding over what we are missing. And sadly, I've done enough funerals for people who passed before their time who I can tell you lived good, meaningful lives, and I've done enough funerals for people who lived to 100 who died full of regret, to tell you that there is a difference.

And so the question that I believe Rosh Hashanah challenges us to think about this year, a year when more people than ever are grasping at straws by going to a far away mountain and giving their life in search of goodness, is at what point is this never ending pursuit of that which we think is good, causing us to forget that which is truly good? At what point has our pursuit of the beauty of Everest, led us to forget the beauty staring at us right in front of our face each and every day? What is the good life that we are supposed to be seeking when we pray *uchtov lechayim tovim*, for a good life, every Rosh Hashanah?

My friends, this morning, I would like to suggest that the way society is redefining what it means to live a good life is not only wrong, but also dangerous. It's literally killing us. The message that tells us that our lives are only good when we are overstimulated or climbing a mountain is wrong. Tafasta Merubah Lo Tafasta teaches the Talmud: because if you try to *tofes*, to take ahold of life too much, to do too much, *lo tafasta*, what you will get is not much at all.

Which is why the first message about living a good life that I want to share, and I'll admit it took me three years of southern living to appreciate this, is that if we want to live a *Chayim tovim*, we must not speed up, but slow down: and that a good life comes from doing less rather than doing too much. In fact, if you do a *gematriya* of the words *chayim tovim* you get the same number 135 of the words *meat hi*: it is less. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev once was reminded of this very lesson after a congregant ran right past him as fast as he could one day on the way to work. Later that day, he asked the man: where were you off to? And he was struck by his choice of words: "Rabbi," he said, I was running after my livelihood." Running? Thought Rabbi, Levi, who struck by his choice of words, then responded, "And how do you know that if you didn't only slow down, instead of running, that your livelihood could have been right behind you all along?" So concerned this man was about running after his livelihood that he missed life in the process. YOLO, once blogged Jason Salcedo, a high school senior from Stuart, Florida is today "used by teens as an absolute justification to do dangerous or harmful things." When in reality, he writes, we too often forget as we run through life, that we not only live once, but as the Unteane Tokef prayer reminds us, we also die once, too. Making the real *carpe diem*, the real taking hold of a good life, not speeding up, or spending 45,000 for a one in ten chance of death. It's seeing every slow second of our lives as precious and every moment as indispensable.

And so must never forget that living a good life, a *Chayim tovim*, will not happen when we spend our time worrying when we miss out, but by seeking moments to intentionally miss out and create joy. Not FOMO, fear of missing out. But as Dr. Brinkmann and others have argued, by JOMO, seeing joy in missing out. We need to stop seeing moments of respite as burdens, but as opportunities. In the Torah, our ancestor Jacob wanders the desert feeling the emptiness of his life, only to wake up from a dream and joyously exclaim: Ma Norah... I can't believe that God was in this place and I did not know it! So too, to live a good life, we must also this new year capture those sacred moments. In the New York Times this summer, Bonnie Tsui wrote an important article entitled: "Remember that you are doing something important when you aren't doing anything." Because contrary to what the world tells us, she writes, "protecting and practicing fallow time is an act of resistance. She calls resting, reconnecting, reading, time with family, moments of missing out, "invisible labors that make creative life, the good life, possible." We live a good life not when we run from Little League game to Soccer Practice to Gym Practice, but when we practice sitting down to Shabbat dinner with our family, when we leave our cellphone in the car and have 3 uninterrupted hours of time in shul, when instead of looking at Facebook, we look at other peoples actual faces. Living a good life doesn't happen when you climb a faraway mountain. It happens when you knock down a wall between you and another human being and turn it into a bridge and cross that instead, when you take time instead to build *shalom bayit*, peace in your home.

Which is why, lastly, we as a society come to understand that living a good life comes not when we run away in search of a treasure, but when we realize that the greatest

treasure, the goodness we seek is right in front of us, if we are only willing to look for it. Rabbi Simcha Bunim liked to tell a story about a man from Pinsk, who wakes up in the middle of the night having dreamt that all of his wildest dreams, the greatest treasure was waiting for him in such and such a house in the town of Minsk. And so he wakes up, kisses his family farewell forever, and runs off to Minsk. Only when he arrives in Minsk, he fails to find the treasure, and runs into a policeman, with whom he shares his story. Seriously, the policeman said. You know, it's funny we met: I also had a dream. God told me that the greatest fool in the world would come to Minsk, only to fail to realize that the treasure that he sought was all along under his floorboards of his home, back in Pinsk.

Why is it that people keep climbing Everest? There's a Yiddish expression that says "to a worm in *chrayn*, horseradish, the whole world is horseradish." People today want to climb Everest because what society tells us living a good life is supposed to be, and we can't see past it. "Life is short," we are told. And so we panic, and we constantly worry that we are missing out on what life has to offer. We travel the world, thinking that the secret to living a good life must be somewhere far away. We want to experience it all, instead of seeing the good in what we have, and enjoying that instead.

Yet living a *chayim tovim*, a good life, according to the great Israeli songwriter Arik Einstein, is not found among those "who climb mountains, who parachute out of the sky: they are the ones who spend their lives always searching" for something else. It is found when we say "*aval ani ohev lehiyot babayit*," That for me, "the good life is being at home with a cup of tea with lemon, with my old books, with the people that we love."

This Rosh Hashanah we will over and over again ask God to grant us a good life. And we may mistakenly believe that our greatest treasure lies in a faraway place, if only we could reach the summit. But this Rosh Hashanah, before we try to take hold of too much, let us remember *tafasta merubah lo tafasta*. Let us work on taking hold of everyday life on intentionally missing out on all of that: with that cup of tea with a lemon, with a book, with the people that we love.