

Life's Second Mountain: Climbing to Fulfillment and Joy

Yom Kippur Morning 5780-2019

For those of us in the AARP card club, do you remember when you received that card on your fiftieth birthday? How do they manage to have that AARP membership card arrive ON one's fiftieth birthday, that card inviting you to join the American Association of Retired Persons?? When mine arrived in the mail, I remember staring at it in disbelief. The first thing I couldn't believe was that it did arrive exactly on April 2nd, 2011, and the other thing I couldn't believe was that I had turned fifty. Turning thirty? No problem. Forty? So what? Now I have to get mammograms... But there was something about turning fifty that really hit me. Suddenly, I became mortal. What disease was right around the corner waiting for me? When would my hip that twinges finally give out? Oh, my gosh, my knee cracks every time I bow on *Baruch Atah Adonai*! When my mother turned fifty, I thought she was SO old. I'm not old... am I? I started to turn my thoughts to the end of life. Who will be widowed first? Do I need a living will. Yes, I should do that now." I guess I was jumping the gun a little. Fifty is NOT old, and should I keep exercising and trying (well, sort of trying) to eat what I should, I will probably have quite a few productive years left.

Having dwelt in this decade now for a while, I have decided not to worry so much about what may befall me, but rather to strive to make these remaining years meaningful for others and thus, meaningful for me.

Though my life of service is far from what it could be, every day I try to do something, even if it's just a text to check on someone. I find great satisfaction by participating in Habitat for Humanity builds, protesting the injustice at the ICE facility in Aurora, and participating in interfaith work, but I know there is much more I can do.

On this day, Yom haKippurim, the Day of Atonement, we are forced to confront our mortality, even if we have not yet received our AARP cards. We read and listen to the haunting chant of Unetaneh Tokef. "Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall see ripe age and who shall not?" We are forced to stop, look, and listen. Stop where you are. Look at your life. Listen to your heart. Ask yourself, "What is it that I really want out of life? What can I do to make an impact on the world and people around me? Whom do I want to be in the time I have left?"

This summer I read a book by David Brooks entitled, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* that I purchased in hopes of answering some of these questions. Brooks says that he wrote the book because

... For six decades the worship of the self has been the central preoccupation of our culture – molding the self, investing in the self, expressing the self. Capitalism, the meritocracy, and modern social science have normalized selfishness; they have made it seem that the only human motives that are real are ... the desire for money, status, and power. They silently spread the message that giving, care, and love are just the icing on society. When a whole society is built around self-preoccupation, its members become separated from one another, divided, and alienated. And that is what has happened to us.

Brooks notes the rise in mental illness, suicide, and distrust in our society which is a direct result of what he calls a “conspiracy against joy.” By seeking instant gratification, focusing on ourselves, and seeking ways to do things faster, we have lost the ability to bond with others, to be emotional, to look at life through a moral lens, and to care about our community. We may be pursuing happiness, but in doing so, pure joy has disappeared from our lives. While “happiness” and “joy” may be synonyms, they are actually quite different, according to Brooks. Happiness comes in the form of a salary raise, a new car, the Rockies playing in the post-season, and sitting down to a yummy meal.

Joy, however, goes far beyond happiness. Joy is the feeling when you truly connect with another human being, when you gaze into the eyes of your baby, or when you and your friends are gasping for air from laughing so hard together. Joy is more communal, where happiness is more individual. Happiness is short-lived, while joy is transformative. Take a moment, close your eyes, and think about the most recent time you experienced happiness. ... Raise your hand when you have something in mind. ... Let's put our hands down. Now keeping our eyes closed, think of a moment in time in which you felt pure joy. You radiated joy, glowing with the ecstatic feeling of pure, unadulterated joy. What was happening? With whom were you? Raise your hand when you've recalled something. ... Let's put your hands down. Sit and enjoy this feeling for a few moments. Now let's open our eyes. Would anyone like to share their most recent happy moment? ... Now would anyone like to share one of your moments of joy? ... How are these moments alike? How are they different?

In his book *The Second Mountain*, Brooks tells us how we can achieve joy in its purest form, but first a little background. Brooks coins a term “moral ecology,” which he defines as a way of being that teaches us which values should be of priority. During the upheaval of World War II, we experienced a time when everyone rallied around a cause and devoted themselves wholeheartedly to that cause. We embraced the values of community – doing our duty for the greater good. There was no concept of taking another job to be more fulfilled. Supporting institutions was important, as was conforming to group norms. The idea was that “all of us are in this together.” I am no better than you, and you are no better than I.

The daily grind of working at the same job year in and year out left many Americans bored and unfulfilled, mindlessly punching the time clock and getting up the next day to do it again. Women felt imprisoned by their Electrolux Vacuums and Jello molds. Racism and anti-Semitism simmered just below the surface but were kept at bay by the societal dictate of keep-your-thoughts-to-yourself-ism. This “moral ecology” solved our problems for a while, but by the early 1960’s, things changed. We began to feel crushed by the establishment, reduced to only a number. Since the current order of society could no longer solve the problems of the current day, counterculture took a proverbial hatchet to it.

So what happened in the 1960’s? Young people began rebelling against authority and rejecting all things institutional. Where the previous ethos was about conformity and performing one’s duty, life in the 1960’s was about celebrating the self. We left the closeness of our generational communities to find ourselves.

The wonderful thing about this shift in society, though, is that it birthed the Civil Rights movement, led to more equality for women, and tamped down the smoldering of anti-Semitism. Homosexuals could now explore life outside the closet.

But eventually the ideals of self-expression and autonomy began to evolve into the extreme, leading to the dominant moral belief system of today that the author names “hyper-individualism.” In our quest for our own desires and wants, the connections we once had to the other individuals with whom we share society are fraying. We answer to one authority: ourselves. Where we once lived in tight-knit communities with the same set of societal norms, now we have been set free. Where we used to give to organizations knowing they would serve us back, now we feel that everyone is out to take something from us. Our lack of interaction has led to distrust, and according to studies, fewer and fewer of us trust our own neighbors, and certainly do not trust the government. Our wariness of others has led us to revert to tribalism, circling the wagons to protect ourselves from those who are not like us and who do not believe like we do. Compromise has become a dirty word.

In our society of hyper-individualism, notes Brooks, we are no longer measured by our behavior, morality, or relationships, but by our personal achievement. Selfishness is now an acceptable trait, he says, because we are promoting ourselves. Consumerism and our worship of technology are replacing intimacy and deep relationships. This has led to loneliness, depression, and fear of not leading the perfect lives of our friends on social media.

Without a sense of connection and belonging to our neighborhoods, families, society at large, or the institutions that once guided our lives, we are feeling like we're in limbo, lacking a sense of grounding in our lives. In short, according to Brooks, we have lost our joy. To develop his point, he talks about our "first mountain" and our "second mountain." We climb the first mountain as we graduate from high school, pursue higher education at the finest institution, and seek to land the perfect position. What is the perfect position or career? It's the one that will prove to be the most lucrative in the shortest amount of time. We work at this for a while, but after a few years we realize we can make more money at a different company, so we move to another position. We climb further, seeking to acquire the coolest car, the biggest house in the nicest neighborhood with the best schools so that our kids can begin to follow the same path towards success that we did. We climb that mountain as quickly as we can.

Once reaching the summit, however, many of us realize that the things we thought were important, like achievement and monetary success, really aren't, and the concerns of the heart and soul tend to take the lead in our lives. This realization often follows disenchantment or unfulfillment, or maybe a life-altering event which can disclose what lies in our hearts and souls, maybe for the first time. It is at this moment that we realize we are ready to begin a second journey.

As we are beginning to climb the second mountain, we realize there is more to life than things, more to life than self. As Hillel said, "*Im ein ani li mi li. Uchsh'ani l'atzmi, mah ani?* If no one is for me, then who will be? But if I am only for myself, what am I?" These are the words of those who are climbing the second mountain.

David Brooks outlines four commitments that one must undertake in order to ascend the second mountain which leads to joy and moral fulfillment: vocation, marriage, faith and philosophy, and community. Let's explore a couple of them.

The first of these is vocation – not a job and not a career. A vocation is a calling. In my class of cantorial and rabbinic students, a significant number of us were older and pursuing a second career – or climbing the second mountain. There were former lawyers, finance folks, office workers... We had reached a point where our careers were not fulfilling anymore. We weren't helping others in the best way that we wanted and were seeking a better path to do so. I was convinced that I had been called to do a very holy thing, and I still see it that way. In serving this congregation, I feel not only happiness, but true joy.

Another commitment that Brooks recommends is to faith and philosophy. Though attendance at houses of worship has declined by 50% in that many years, religion can be a meaningful way to live a life of service, providing its followers with quite a few benefits. One of them is ritual. Ritual is a function of our commitment to something. You take your love for something and create a system of behavior and protocol that helps you remember your love and dedication to it.

In Judaism, there are 613 commandments. Many deal with ethics, but they also teach us how to do things like celebrate Shabbat. The rabbis took these teachings further, creating blessings for us to recite for literally every act in our daily lives. Practicing Judaism largely consists of performing these rituals. We even turn our customs into rituals. Who thinks of observing Chanukah without latkes?

It is these rituals that bring us together, sometimes at home and other times with our B'nai Chaim community. They remind us of our connections to each other, to God, and to the shared beliefs that unite us.

While reading this book, I tried to filter the author's ideas as I often do through the lens of Jewish teachings. Perhaps our rabbis could see where the future would lead us, for many of our texts and writings address the very points that Brooks discusses in his book. Regarding community and maintaining ties with one another, Judaism has a lot to say.

Have you ever thought about how we are called *Am Yisrael* (the People of Israel) and not *Da'at Yisrael* (the Religion of Israel)? Our peoplehood and community life are much more important than the religiosity of our lives, BUT it is considered a religious obligation to be with and do things with the community. The Midrash says that if one sets oneself aside in the corner of the house, and says, "Why should I trouble myself for the community? What's in it for me to take part? Why should I listen to their voices? I'm fine [without this]," this person destroys the world. Caring only for ourselves without care for others or the community is akin to destroying the world!

I sometimes feel like our world IS being destroyed by our selfishness, greed, and hunger for power that are part of our hyper-individualism. There is the "I've got mine, so I don't owe you anything" credo and the "Hey, it's not MY problem" mindset. If people are suffering on the other side of the world (or two blocks away) it doesn't affect me, so why should I care? Needless to say, this is a very UN-Jewish attitude.

Pirkei Avot teaches that one should “bear the yoke with his fellow.” We should care if others are suffering no matter who or where they are — whether their suffering is in the form of mass slaughter half a world away, or because their home was lost in a wildfire half a country away, or they are homeless across town, or they are dealing with illness next door. We have to do something.

Our desire to care must be because we all share the world together. This was the moral ecology of our grandparents and parents, but maybe we need some more of it. These days of repentance are all about return. Maybe we should return to caring, service, and looking out for “the stranger, the poor, the widow, and the orphan” as we are commanded in the Torah. I long and pray for the kind of world where all are cared for and protected. Let us achieve our goals, receive education, and succeed, but let us also remember to use these gifts for giving to others. Let us commit ourselves to climbing the second mountain, no matter how difficult it becomes. And in doing so, when we face our mortality on this Day of Atonement, we need not shudder in fear, but express our gratitude for the lives we have chosen in service to others on the journey up the second mountain. Then we can experience true joy, even when that AARP card arrives on our birthday. Shanah tovah!