



Rabbi Rachel Timoner

“On Purpose”

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“Futile! Everything is futile! What does a person ever gain from all the effort he expends on this earth? One generation goes and another comes, and the earth stays the same forever.”

I can't help but feel that these words from Ecclesiastes fit the mood of our country on this Rosh Hashanah. We are depressed. We're in the fourth year of economic woe without relief in sight. People are suffering. Almost one of every ten Americans is desperately looking for work, and many more have lost hope. Soup kitchens and food pantries report unprecedented need and insufficient supplies. The federal government is in deadlock. State and local governments are in crisis. The middle class has been shrinking for the last forty years. Schools are a wreck and public colleges are being defunded, while prison populations are larger than ever before. Ten years after September 11th, we've never quite recovered emotionally or psychologically. America has lost its place in the world, and it feels like nothing we do can make a difference.

What is our purpose? In times like these, the question might strike us while on the way to our job, or on a long day of searching for work, or while carting our children to and from school, or in a quiet moment of retirement. Even if our days are full of places to be and things to do, the question crouches at the edge of our consciousness: Is there a purpose?

Monuments crumble, empires disappear, generations fade away. A loved one is diagnosed with something they say has no cure, and suddenly it doesn't matter if we've kept up with the laundry or done our taxes or repaired that place on the ceiling where the paint was chipping. Entropy feels relentless. It disassembles what we've built, pulling the pieces apart to reveal the void gaping within. We toil away – building lives, filling schedules, planting gardens—and yet things continue to fall apart. We ask ourselves: what is the point of all this effort? There are 6.9 billion people on earth and there have been roughly 500 generations since human civilization began. What are we doing here? What if there is no point at all?

Nihilism. Nietzsche warned us that it would characterize our era. The emptying of the world of all meaning and purpose: he called it “the danger of dangers.”

We used to believe in God. Not just some of us, but almost all of us used to believe in God. At first, we believed that we were at the center of God’s universe. We believed that God was like a big man in the sky who could show up at any time to warn us of a flood or speak to us from fire. We believed that God would protect us and make us mighty in battle and as countless as the sands and the stars. We believed that if we followed God’s laws, God would bless us. And if we did not follow God’s laws, God would punish us. These beliefs united us, comforted us, and gave us a shared framework of meaning. We knew our purpose: living a good life meant fulfilling God’s commands.

But then we remained small, nowhere near as countless as the sands and the stars, and relatively powerless, a tiny fraction of the world’s population. We were despised for generations, suffering a litany of abuses until a horrific fate beyond all imagining befell our people. No one could say that one million children were being punished. Good people went hungry, good people were diagnosed with cancer. God wasn’t showing up in pillars of fire or putting words in the mouths of our prophets. And we learned that we live on a small planet circling an insignificant star, in a peripheral galaxy of a vast cosmos. And many of our people stopped believing in God.

But even if we didn’t believe in God, at least we believed in America. Many of you in this room grew up in a time when we believed in and honored our government. We trusted our president and gave him the power to put us back to work. We believed in our military, and we knew that its war against fascism was noble and necessary. We volunteered, we sacrificed, we worked, we contributed. There was a feeling that we were all in it together. We believed that business was a pillar of the community. And we believed in the media – we trusted the newsreels and then Walter Cronkite. America was good and right. We knew we had a purpose – living a good life meant working hard, loving your country, and sacrificing for its success.

Then there was the specter of nuclear war, and then Vietnam, and more recently a war in Iraq that almost no one today can justify. Political scandals are so frequent they are expected. A runaway greed led to a business climate that maximized profits at any cost. Television news became mere entertainment. And now many of us have lost faith in our government, business, military, and media.

But even if we didn't believe in American institutions, at least we believed in changing them. When social movements sought to transform our country, this congregation was a part of them. Rosa Parks refused to move. Children in Birmingham braved fire hoses and Bull Connor's dogs. The Freedom Riders faced down brutal mobs, and some of you were there. Cesar Chavez went on hunger strike and we didn't eat grapes. Flowers were placed in guns at Kent State, and we were out on the streets. There was consciousness raising and women's liberation. People marched. People sang. People believed that a new day was coming, a new world was being born. This congregation was a part of it. We knew what our purpose was: living a good life meant giving our time, energy, attention, and effort to change the world.

Belief in God, belief in America, belief in social change. It was never this simple, of course: there were always disbelievers at every stage. But there was some collective belief that defined meaning and gave life purpose.

And then we became profoundly disappointed by the limits of social change. We'd marched, we felt powerful, we believed, and when not enough changed, it felt futile. Some of us gave up, stopped believing that we could make any difference at all.

If we are disappointed with rebellion, says Thomas Hibbs, who studies nihilism in popular culture, "both rebellion and convention seem foolish, and you're left with snickering irony."

Generation X, Generation Y, the Millennials. With each successive chapter we become more focused on self-fulfillment, less focused on collective sacrifice. If we don't believe in God or in the institutions of our society, and we don't believe that social change works or that life has transcendent purpose, what are we left to believe in, but ourselves? This is passive nihilism. We retreat from any collective commitment, and narrow the circumference of our concerns to the self. What is the message our children have received about the purpose of life? The "good life" being broadcast from every media outlet in our age is not "follow God's mitzvot," or "sacrifice for the good of your country," or "contribute your life to social change," but: become rich and famous. And the problem is: these goals are empty of meaning.

We crave meaning. A study published in the New York Times on Labor Day weekend found that American workers are terribly unhappy at work. Why? Researchers expected pay rates, hours, and stress to be at the top of the list. But they were wrong. The most important factor in work satisfaction is that workers believe that their work has meaning and feel that they are making progress toward meaning.

I read a beautiful book this summer by a man named James Kugel, a professor emeritus at Harvard. His book is called *In the Valley of the Shadow: on the origins of religious belief*. He

begins with the moment when he learned that he had a cancer with a very low cure rate. He was given two years to live. And he describes how what he calls “the background music” of his life stopped. He writes: “it had always been there, the music of daily life that’s constantly going, the music of infinite time and possibilities; and now suddenly it was gone, replaced by nothing, just silence. There you are, one little person, sitting in the late summer sun, with only a few things left to do.”

In his state of silence, Kugel found a starkness that was immediate. He could see that he fit into something larger than himself. He discovered that our eyes and ears aren’t telling us the whole story. We are privy to only a small fraction of the sensory phenomena around us at this moment, and we cannot grasp the scale of time and space in which this moment sits. We now know so much more than we used to about the universe and human life, but there’s so much we still don’t understand. Kugel theorizes that ancient people were more aware of how they fit into the world around them, but as the self has grown larger and the background music has gotten louder, we’ve become less able to perceive what lies beyond us.

Kugel writes: “Religion is a fundamental openness to that which cannot be seen by the eyes or heard by the ears... There may indeed be something ‘mythic’ about it, but it pales before the mythic quality of our own clumsy, modern selves... these myths of our [selves] are quite pointless in a moment of privileged insight, when we are able to catch a glimpse of what lies beyond our own real being.”

If all we can see is the self, if all we can hear is the background music, of course it is difficult to make the case for transcendent purpose in our lives. But when we are able to sense that the self is part of something larger, when we become aware of the presence beyond us, and of the web of human relationships in which we dwell, we can make peace with how small we are and how brief our lives are.

It is true that monuments crumble, but the civilizations that built them continue to impact humanity long after the buildings have turned to dust. In this light, the hundreds of generations before us do not make us insignificant, they make us significant. Human learning is cumulative. Our language, technology, consciousness, values are built on those who came before, and influence those who follow. Yes, we will die. Yes, we will disappear from the earth, but our generation will shape the future. We are part of the unfolding drama of human life on earth.

It’s true that when first confronted by a devastating diagnosis of a loved one, the chipped paint on the ceiling and the weeds in the garden don’t matter at all, but as the weeks go by we realize that if we want to make the most of whatever time we have left, and if we want to leave something for those who come after us, we’d better tend our garden and repair our house.

We have to believe that what we do matters. This may take a leap of faith, but it is a leap we must make. Apathy and disengagement are not working. Because we doubt everything, we are losing hope for our children's future. We are presented with a false choice: on one side, there is religious absolutism promising structure, simple answers, and a universal moral code imposed on all. On the other side, the idea that life is random and we exist merely to perpetuate it.

There is another way: It's time to believe again. Not to believe that we're at the center of the universe, or that God's going to speak to us from fire, or that life is fair, or that bad things only happen to bad people. But to believe that we're part of something larger than ourselves, interconnected beyond understanding, swimming in and suffused with what's beyond us. Our fear that we stand on the brink of a gaping void enables us to peer over the edge and find that the void itself – around which electrons swirl and in which our planet spins – is God's presence. It was the Kabbalists who called God both *Ayin*, Nothingness, and *Ein Sof*, the Limitless One.

And it is time to believe again in the public sphere. Not that American institutions are without flaws, or that we can create a perfect world in our own lifetimes. But to believe that it's worth investing in government, in education, in jobs. It's worth sacrificing again for the greater good, giving our time and energy and resources to rebuild our country. Our nation cannot afford our nihilism. People are suffering, and if there was ever a time for an engaged citizenry, this is that time.

It is time to believe again that we can change one small patch of the world. Even if we were disappointed before, it is time to try again, to see ours as just one leg in the journey of many generations toward redemption. As Martin Luther King said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Judaism insists that every life has meaning. This is what Torah teaches: we are in covenant with Adonai, yod-hey-vav-hey, the source of being. We look out at our world and we see beauty and also brokenness. Do not look away from the brokenness, Torah teaches, "Do not remain indifferent." We were born to make this world better than we found it. We are in covenant, carrying on our people's commitment to make the world whole with the actions of our lives. This is our purpose – to act in such a way that our lives themselves are instruments of redemption, instruments to create healing, justice, prosperity, compassion, peace, and sustainability on earth.

These most sacred days of the year have come to awaken us to the fact that the world, and our lives, are hanging in a delicate balance. In the *u'netaneh tokef* prayer, the signature prayer of both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, a terrible list of fates are arrayed before us. Who will die by fire, who by drowning, who by plague...bad things will happen to all of us *but*, the prayer

insists, we are not powerless before our deaths. There are three things we can do while we live: *tefilah*, *teshuvah*, *tzedakah*. *Tefilah* is the word for prayer, but it means self-examination, looking deeply at our lives; *teshuvah* means changing our ways, returning our hearts to God; *tzedakah* means acting for a more just world.

Why? Why does our prayerbook insist that we do these things? If we're all going to die, why does it matter? Because, this prayer insists, our lives are not random. They are soaked in meaning. The world hinges on our actions. We are part of a great drama, by which humanity partners with God to redeem our world. And we have a limited number of years to give. When we do *tefilah*, *teshuvah*, and *tzedakah* we remember why we're here. When we examine ourselves, change our ways, and act for a more just world, we see that our lives are filled with purpose. This doesn't prevent our deaths, but it gives our lives, and our deaths, meaning.

In this light, we see that the words of Ecclesiastes may have been misunderstood. The Hebrew word that has been translated as "futile" is *hevel*, but *hevel* does not literally mean futile. It means vapor, mist, that which is ungraspable. On second look, it seems Ecclesiastes was not saying that life is futile, but that we cannot grasp the meaning of our lives from within them. We cannot see our purpose, or the impact we have, because our lives are like vapor, like grass that withers, like a dream that fades. Our perspective is simply too small. From the limited view of a brief and fleeting life, it looks as if "one generation goes and another comes, and the earth remains the same forever." But we know now that the earth does not remain the same forever. For better and for worse, the great flow of human life over time leaves its mark on the earth. For better and for worse, each generation contributes a legacy of change. Let our legacy be for the better.

A family in a Reform congregation in New Jersey lost their son on September 11th. To remember him, they created a one-week camp for children who lost parents on that day: "You can't describe in words what this camp has given us," says a camper. "They gave us hope and a place to breathe."

A member of another Reform congregation in Massachusetts realized that her child was a bully in his school. She joined together with other members, some of whose children were *being* bullied, and they realized that they were all in a system that lacked accountability. Together they passed comprehensive, statewide anti-bullying legislation.

A member of another Reform congregation was concerned about the care that his elderly parents were receiving in a nursing home. He joined together with other members whose parents were in the same facility, and they found that the Haitian workers there had terrible working conditions – including not getting any breaks, and not being allowed to speak their own language – and in turn

they were not delivering the care they'd want to give. The Jewish families and the Haitian workers came together and secured better conditions for the workers and better care for the residents.

The camp didn't change the world, or reverse 9/11. But hundreds of children have been healed in important ways, reducing the trauma they'll pass on to their children. The anti-bullying legislation doesn't keep every child safe. But millions of children are safer than they were before, and the law may someday become a nationwide standard. The nursing home isn't perfect now, but there's a bond between the caregivers and those receiving care, and both the workers and the residents are getting more of what they need.

What will *we* do together? As Rabbi Chasen said last night, we are launching a powerful new initiative at Leo Baeck Temple: Congregation Based Community Organizing. We'll start by listening to one another in hundreds of one-to-one conversations through the fall. You'll find cards on your seats inviting you to participate. Out of these one-to-one conversations and house meetings, we'll identify the issues that are most pressing in our lives, most present in our stories. We'll research those issues and look for something specific, significant, and winnable that we can achieve. And then we'll get to work – taking action to add our contribution to our generation's legacy of change.

Judaism teaches that we exist to participate in the healing and transformation of our world. We do this through mitzvot. We do this through *tefilah*, *teshuva*, and *tzedakah*. We do this by nurturing loving-kindness in ourselves and others. We do this through action that makes one small broken corner of our world more whole. Our country needs this from us now, more than ever. This is the work we are about to embark on together. Even when we feel small, even when we cannot grasp how any of it matters, even when everything seems futile, we must each find our part in the great drama of the redemption of our world. This is our fulfillment of covenant. This is nothing less than the purpose of our lives.

Closing Benediction:

Dear God, transcendent presence within us and beyond us, help us to believe again – in you, in our country, and in social change. Even when we doubt, even when we feel despair, give us the courage to trust that our lives have purpose and that our actions matter. This year, bless us with the strength and resolve to live out your covenant, to do our small part to make our world how it should be. Then, then, it will truly be a Shanah Tovah.