

When All That We Dream For Comes True

Last November the Chief Rabbi of Rome came to visit Vancouver. He opened his lecture with the following piece of information. “ If you ask the average Italian how many Jews live in Italy, he will probably tell you that there are 500,000.” In fact there are only 15,000 Jews in Italy, but they have risen to political and economic prominence such that they make the impact of 500,000. It is nice to know that our Italian cousins have the same experience that we do. Jews barely make up 2% of the North American population, yet they make up a disproportionate number of the political and economic leadership today. In the past years there has been a Jewish Justice minister in Canada, and in the United States, they were just a few hundred ballots short of having a Jewish Vice President. The President that was actually elected appointed a Jewish Press Secretary, and the Secretary of State spoke Yiddish although he was African American (ok he doesn't count but you have to admit, it is close). The President that he replaced had a cabinet that was more than 50% Jewish.

Some more statistics: There are 37 Jews serving in the US Congress, including 10% of the Senate that is Jewish. One could accuse me of forgetting that we are in Canada, but the Canadian statistics are not quite as impressive, but we are working on them. 37% of the winners of the National Medal of Science are Jewish and 25% of the winners of the Nobel prize winners in Literature are Jewish, 50% of the world chess champions have had one or 2 Jewish parents.

The Jewish community is also now wealthier than it has ever been before. Ever since the Jews were allowed out of the ghetto and into European society at the dawning of the Enlightenment, they have peopled the arts and sciences, politics, and history in astonishing disproportion to their numbers.

Last week Wall Street Journal columnist Charles Krauthammer wrote an article on George Allen, former governor of Virginia, one-term senator, son of a famous football coach and in the midst of a heated battle for re-election. This notable figure has just been “outed” as a Jew as the result of a particularly nasty campaign. Charles Krauthammer writes, “There are 13 million Jews in the world, one-fifth of 1 percent of the world's population. Yet 20 percent of Nobel Prize winners are Jewish, a staggering hundredfold surplus of renown and genius. This is similarly true for a myriad of other “everyones” — the household names in music, literature, mathematics, physics, finance, industry, design, comedy, film and, as the doors opened, even politics”. I did a little research on Statistics of the “everyones”. And here it is: 23 times the population ration in Westinghouse Science Talent Search, 13.times the population ration of US Law School Professors, 10 times population ration attending Ivy League universities, five times the population ration of Pulitzer prize winners. 60% of Top Hollywood positions according to the TV show 60 Minutes, are Jewish; 40% American Nobel laureates in science economics, 23% 1982 Forbes 500 richest Americans are Jewish, 23% of Top 100 wealthy Canadians, 17% of Nobel Physiology and Medicine are Jewish.

It might sound as if I am writing for the conspiracy theorists, but I am not. The truth is that that is just the achievement list in objective terms. Let's think about things in comparison to where the Jews were. 250 years ago no Jew had citizenship in any country. France was the first European country to grant citizenship to the Jew a year after the French revolution. We are familiar with the "none is too many" policy. We are familiar with Jewish quotas at Ivy League schools, medical schools and dental schools. We know that Jews were kept out of certain trades for centuries.

But now look. There is virtually no profession that Jews cannot and do not enter. Look around the room - God spare us from needing them, but if you needed eye surgery or a cardiac consult, the Schara Tzedek on Yom Kippur is perhaps the best place in the city to make an appointment. (I know there are specialties that I missed - they can demand representation for next year - see me after services). Our kids are interning on parliament hill, working in fashion, city planners, teachers, accountants, hair stylists and movie makers. We may not have many Jews in the NHL but we have the commissioner and several owners.

Even on the home level life has changed for the Jew. More than one person has told me that years ago, on special occasions in Europe, Chanukah, a holiday or even a bar mitzvah you would get an orange as a treat. An orange. My kids like a good Clementine, but half the time they leave 60% of one untouched.

Look at scholarship. Look at the opportunities that are now available to learn Torah. There are more Jews who study torah full time now than ever before. There are more Jewish texts available, in French, English, Spanish, Italian and Russian to name a couple of languages. There is no longer an excuse for not studying the Talmud. Artscroll has translated it into a version that will hold your hand through the most intricate Talmudic discussions. Even the Zohar has been translated into English.

And we have not even touched the blessing of finally having our own country and homeland, that protects and nourishes the Jew.

So what is my point with all of this boasting. To sum it up, we are more powerful, we are wealthier, we have more opportunity and we have greater access to Jewish knowledge than ever before.

Then the big question. What are we going to do with all of it? When all of your dreams have come true, when all that our ancestors fought for and prayed for is delivered into our hands, **WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH THIS BLESSING?** Where, and to what should we apply the immense intellectual, financial and educational recourses at our disposal.

There is a story that they tell about the U.S. President Linden Johnson. One of his speech writers was moving on to a new position and he decided to play a little practical joke on the President. He prepared a Rose Garden speech for the President on note cards. It was to be delivered to representatives of Girl Scouts of America. The cards read, "If we want

to stamp out hunger; if we want to eliminate poverty; if we want to erase disease; if we want to provide universal education; if we want every able body to have a job; all we have to do is . . .” The next card read, “Ok Linden you’re on your own.”

That is a little how I felt writing this speech. The question possessed me, but where do I find the answer. Where, to what, should we apply the immense intellectual, financial and educational recourses at our disposal? But the answer was not readily available on the next card.

The questions boil down to: How does one manage such enormous potential?, How to maximize what it has to offer?, What advice to give to those who are the owners and managers of this potential? How should we access this enormous gift?

Yom Kippur is the day that is most appropriate to addressing these questions. The Rambam teaches that all Israel has merits and iniquities. Those whose merits are greater than their iniquities are termed Tzaddik (righteous). Those whose iniquities are greater than their merits are termed Rasha (wicked). Those whose merits and iniquities are exactly even are called a Beinoni (intermediate). Similarly, of a nation. If its iniquities outweigh its merits, it will fall in decline as did Sodom.

The implication is simple on paper but complex in its application. Simply put there is an accounting underway. Each of us contributes to the total picture. We all put our actions on the scale and we hope that we tip the scales to the proper place. Of course Rambam is quick to point out it is impossible to know which action or personal quality contributes greatly and which minimally, as only God can know that. The thought analogy that comes to mind is one of all Israel in a life boat rowing to get to shore. Every oar in the water makes a difference. And from that statistics mentioned before we have an Olympic quality crew. Those not rowing are dead weight, and those who drill holes in their own seats affect the rest of the boat as well.

This description places immense importance on every individual. That means you sitting in seat 561 and you in 325 your little mitzvah, or your act of charity could make the difference. The Rambam’s lesson is expressed well in a *mishna* in *Perkei Avot*.

<p>Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the task is great, the laborers are lazy, the wage is abundant and the master is urgent. He used to say: It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task. Yet, you are not free to desist from it.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">משנה מסכת אבות פרק ב</p> <p style="text-align: right;">משנה טו</p> <p>[יד] רבי טרפון אומר היום קצר והמלאכה מרובה והפועלים עצלים והשכר הרבה ובעל הבית דוחק:</p> <p style="text-align: right;">משנה טז</p> <p>[טו] הוא היה אומר לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן חורין ליבטל ממנה אם ...</p>
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There is a sense of *individual urgency* in this text. The day is short, so get to work, the task or rather what we want to accomplish, the dream the Torah paints for us is great, the utopia that awaits the fulfillment of the Torah dream is a monumental task and the Master, meaning God, is demanding.

It is not incumbent on you to finish the task. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains this teaches us about our interdependence, the job was never for one individual to complete. Read carefully, it says that it is not incumbent upon you to finish, but it is incumbent upon you to start. You don't have to finish because the person sitting next to you and across from you are also needed to complete the dream. We are interdependent and also completely dependant on each other's efforts.

Most important we are not free to abandon the task. It is so easy to say "what can I do, what contribution can I make?" Compared to the greater whole your contribution may not look like much, but it is through the power of the collective that we come to realize the completion of the task.

This is exactly what Maimonides suggests about Yom Kippur; that we have to ask 'have we personally done enough, have contributed our share to tip the scales?'

There is a social phenomena that we all have to fight against. It is called defused responsibility. The classic example was the case of a woman called Kitty Genovese. Thirty eight people heard or watched the murder of this woman in Kew Gardens, New York. Yet all of them assumed another person would call the police, another person would intervene. Diffused responsibility takes place when in a group of peers who act or, through inaction, allow events to occur which they would never allow if alone. If Kitty was screaming in a field next to the wood cutter's cottage, he would have stormed out with an ax, but since there were 36 other people in the building, everyone else figured another would do the responsible action. So on Yom Kippur the Rambam teaches us we cannot diffuse responsibility we must accept it personally, and continue to accept it through out the year.

There is a story they tell about Eliyahu Hanavai. That between Seder nights Eliyahu travels around dressed like a beggar. One day he finds a kind man, named Hershel on edge of a forest who offers him food and place to sleep and makes him feel like a king. Because of his kindness Eliyahu grants him a gift, one of a purse that continuously refills with gold coins, as soon as it is emptied it will refill. With this gift Eliyahu charges him "use it well". Years later Eliyahu returns to check on his friend, but he cannot find the small house at the edge of the forest. Instead he finds a large imposing castle with a heavily fortified wall and gate. He tries to enter the gate but is denied by the guards and the mastiffs. Suddenly a carriage appears and Eliyahu plants himself in its path. The passenger begins to yell, "what do I pay you for, why is this beggar in the middle of the road?". And suddenly Hershel recognizes Eliyahu. Eliyahu says "is this what you use my gift for. I think it is time to give it back." Of course in the story we all recognize the lack of virtue of Hershel. He has a gift and even after the charge of 'use it well', he fails to distribute it properly.

The issue that we battle against is the defused responsibility. The many different people who themselves own a part of our gift. The capacity in this room is unbelievable. With intellectual, technical, practical and financial resources in this room we could have everything we dream of, for our Jewish Community our city and beyond. Some of you have expertise in marketing that you have brought to the Synagogue. Some in accounting. Others have great strength in education, and some in management. The lights in this room were made brighter by an electrician who donated his time. Regularly you, the men and women that fill this room, share with me a brilliant idea for a program or initiative, that we, as an organized unit, cannot bring to reality for a lack of human or financial resources. Just for this second, I want to focus on the brilliance of the ideas. There are excellent writers among you. There are also brilliant entrepreneurs and great artists.

I really have no doubt that if we truly were to apply all of our resources we could create the Jewish community, the city that only exists in our dreams. “How many doubted that our community would have been able to host a Maccabi games?” The only thing that holds us back is the individual initiative. The Rambam teaches us that on this day we cannot look around and assume that someone else will step forward. We have to look at ourselves and to ourselves. The defusion of responsibility is removed, because Vancouver, Canada and Am Yisrael need each and every ounce of merit possible. Which leads us to how we ask the questions on this day of Attonement. There is a story they tell about the famous Chassidic Rebbe Zusha of Anipol. Zusha was reportedly always b’shimcha always in joy. But one day his students found him weeping like a baby. They asked “Rebbe, why do you weep?” He answered that he was studying the mishna in Pirkei Avot (about which we spoke) – ‘the day is short and the work is great’. I realized God will not ask me, “Zusha, how come you were not as great as Moshe Rabenu, and he will not ask me Zusha why were you not as great as David Hamelech, or Zusha why were you not a scholar like my Maimonidies, He will ask me “Zusha why were you not as great as Zusha could be”. He will ask “Zusha, why are you not as great as Zusha?”

That is the question. The talent and the resources are here. You have them. And it is about initiative. So ask your self these questions, “ how can I take more initiative, how can I take more responsibility for and in the Jewish Community? and ask yourself. “why was I not more like me?”