

ראש השנה תשס"ו for First Day of דבר תורה Rosh Hashanah 5766
"When I Grow Up"

What did you want to be when you grew up? We were all five years old once, not a care in the world, and one of the things that defined us was what we wanted to be when we grew up. I wanted to be a lawyer. In fact, my mother knew I was going to be a lawyer as well. She tells me that when I was five years old, she used to tell me at night, "Noah, go to bed." Hours later, when she came in to check on me, she would find me in bed, reading, watching TV, or whatever else it was that I was doing . . . anything but sleeping. "Noah, I told you to go to bed," she said. "Well, I'm here!"

Yes, I always wanted to be a lawyer. What did you want to be? Well, anyway, we all eventually decided what we wanted to be when we grew up (if we decided to grow up at all). And we worked hard to get there, didn't we? To become a lawyer, I worked hard in high school (at least I told my parents I did), I went to college, and law school. Even then I still had to take the bar exam. And after becoming a lawyer, I have to do CLE, Continuing Legal Education, and I read up about my profession. Wow. It takes a lot of hard work to become what we want to be when we grow up.

So now we grow older, we get married (or at least our mother and congregants would like us to), and we have children, and maybe even grandchildren. Do you remember the day your first child was born? Or the day you first became a grandparent? Let me ask you, do you remember thinking then what you wanted your child or grandchild to be when they grew up? I bet your words like "doctor" and "lawyer" hardly came to mind. I bet there were other words on your minds: "happy," "healthy," "good." I remember talking once with my father about wanting to be a rabbi and a lawyer, pursuits for which my parents gave me a great deal of support. But I remember my father telling me "whatever you do, what's more important, is that you be a mensch."

It's funny how priorities change. When I sit down with families of a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, I usually ask the parents about their children. What are they most proud of about their children? I've yet to hear "I'm proud of my child because she wants to be a doctor," or "I'm so proud because my son wants to be an athlete." Over and over I hear parents talking about how they are proud that their child has a kind heart, is willing to help others, and is a good friend.

But it's a funny thing about priorities. Sometimes we forget our true priorities as we decide how to live our lives. We want to be successful in our trade, so we worked hard in school, and have late hours of work. We spend time looking at our investments, and giving extra special care to important clients. We want to provide for our children and grandchildren, so we work even harder to build up a school fund to provide for their education.

But when we stop and think about it, is that really our priority? Do we really want to spend all our time and effort, our entire adult life, working to build up a school fund? Do we want our children to remember us for how late we came home from work? Didn't we just say, that it is more important for us and for our children to be healthy and happy, and that we want ourselves and our children to be decent people? What have we done towards that effort? What have we done to make ourselves decent, honest, trustworthy people. People of charity, people who perform acts of kindness?

Have we given as much time and effort towards realizing that goal as we have towards educating ourselves and our children for professional life? Surely we all do some praiseworthy things in life. But do we put as much effort into making ourselves good people as we put into making ourselves good professionals? Do we have ways of teaching our children how to be a mensch? It's funny, you can't exactly go to MIT for that. But, there is somewhere that we can turn.

To be sure, there's nothing wrong with wanting a roof over our heads, and even a little bit of luxury in life. And so, we do build our professions, and we do put in time and effort in order to build the school fund. But do we want to define ourselves, or worse, have our children define us, by the late hours we work in order to own a Lexus? Or do we want to define ourselves by the hours we spend teaching ourselves and our children how to be good people? If we want to achieve the higher goal of being a mensch, we need to divert some of our time and effort from the school fund, and invest it in the shul fund.

You see, that's what we're about in Judaism. We are a religion that works to frame our lives in such a way that we can be good people. Our time studying the *Torah*, our time spent in prayer, and our time performing ritual acts is meant to educate us on how to be good, honest, and caring people. And as much as we need to work to build our child's school fund so that they can earn a living in the future, we need to build our children's character by investing in the shul fund.

For each of us in our chosen profession, we need to read trade magazines, read newspapers, and many of us have to attend classes for continuing education. For me as a lawyer, I need to attend C.L.E. - Continuing Legal Education. But for each of us, who aspire to be good people, who hope to be examples to our children and grandchildren, we need to take time in another form of C.L.E. - Continuing Life Education.

In Judaism, there are three main elements to our religious practice. Each is designed not as empty ritual, but as inspiration to living a good life. In Jewish practice, we study Torah, we observe Jewish law, and we pray.

When we learn Torah, we do so not purely out of a sense of intellectual curiosity, but out of a belief that understanding God's law will lead us to proper behavior. The Talmud (Kiddushin 40b) reports a debate as to whether study of Torah is greater, or taking action is greater. The conclusion: תלמוד גדול, שהתלמוד מביא לידי מעשה - *study is greater, for study leads to action*.

מצוות (*Mitzvot*, commandments) are also meant to make us better people. The sage Rav, commenting on the laws of Kashruth, said: *The commandments were only given to Israel in order to refine humanity* (Genesis Rabbah 44:1, cf Leviticus Rabbah 13:3 and parallels). He explains: וכי מה איכפת ליה להקבי"ה למי ששוחט מן העורף *what does it matter to God whether a person slaughters from the throat or from the nape of the neck?* *Mitzvot* are our reminder that in every facet of our lives - whether it be business or personal, whether it concerns a physical action such as eating, or a spiritual action such as prayer - there is always a better way to do things, and a worse way. Having commandments is a way of reminding us that God cares how we behave at all times.

Commandments are also designed to keep us away from bad behavior:

ה בואת יבא אהרן זשי"ה (משלי כד) כי בתחבולות תעשה לך מלחמה ר' נתן ור' אחא בשם ר' סימון אמר אם עשית חבילות של עבירות עשה כנגדן חבילות של מצות (שם /משלי ו) עינים רמות (דברים ו) והיו לטוטפות בין עיניך לשון שקר ולמדתם אותם את בניכם ידים שופכות דם נקי (שם /דברים ו) וקשרתם לאות על ידך לב חורש מחשבות און והיו הדברים האלה ... ומשלח מדנים בין אחים (תהלים לד) בקש שלום ורדפהו

R. Nathan and R. Aha said in the name of Rabbi Simon: If you have done many sins, do many mitzvot.

"Haughty eyes": [Let tefillin] be "a sign between your eyes."

"Lying tongue": "Teach these words [of Torah] to your sons."

"Hands that spill innocent blood:" "Tie [Tefillin] as a sign on your arm."

"A heart which thinks of evil acts:" "Let these words which I command you be on your heart."

..."One who creates discord amongst brethren," [the verse states]: "seek peace and chase after it."(Lev. Rab. 21)

Commandments are our constant reminder of how we should behave in life.

And then there is prayer. Prayer is our time to reflect - to remind ourselves of our place in the world. That we have a creator, and we have duties and responsibilities in life. We pray daily, because we realize that every day is another opportunity to do good. Another opportunity to get things right. By the time we go to sleep at night, we hope that the world will have been better off because we woke up that morning. Prayer is our constant inspiration to do good deeds.

This year, I hope that each one of us does more good deeds than we did last year. I hope that we give more charity, visit the sick more often, help our friends in need, care for our parents and children, and seek peace between neighbors and family. But as Jews, we don't just say that we hope we will do these things. We train ourselves to do these things. We use our *Torah*, our *mitzvot*, and our prayers as inspiration and conditioning for performing acts of generosity.

What do you want to be when you grow up? Kinder? Gentler? More loving? More caring? Each one of us is still growing up a little, even as we watch our children and grandchildren do the same. But now we understand what it's all about. And now, we can be the model for our children - making Judaism a priority in our lives, So that we take as much time making ourselves good people, as we have taken making ourselves good breadwinners. This year, we have to make a withdrawal from the school fund, and invest some more time and effort in the shul fund.

Success in our occupation takes years of training, years of learning. And so too, none of us can turn into a צדיק (*tsadik*, righteous person) overnight. But we can start training now. Taking more time out of our lives to participate in Jewish ritual and our Jewish community. Bringing our children, and grandchildren, or perhaps our parents and grandparents to do the same. We can attend more services, pray more often at home, share a Shabbat dinner with our family, or begin to study about Judaism, for instance by attending the Basic Judaism Course which we are offering this year. Every little bit you can do is a little more preparation to make yourself a better person - it is C.L.E. - continuing life education.

For your child, keep them on the path of Jewish involvement. Insure for them a strong Jewish education, by sending them to day school, and by reinforcing what they learn in day school or Hebrew school by working with them at home and bringing them to regular services in synagogue. Get your child involved in Young Judea. Consider sending your child to their summer camp. Invest your time and effort in giving your children the tools to become real mensches in life.

What do you want to be when you grow up? What do you want your children to be when they grow up? And what are you doing to get there from here? May this year be a year of personal growth for all of us. May our lives be filled with *Torah* and *mitzvot*, and may those deeds lead us to *gemilut chasadim*: acts of love and kindness towards all those around us.