



# HUMANISTIC JEWISH CONGREGATION OF SAN DIEGO

SERVING SAN DIEGO COUNTY SINCE 1985

## ROSH HASHANAH 2008

### *Turn the Page*

In a society eased by the availability of information via electronic media, books are still important. Just think about all the ways that have developed over the last ten years for getting books into people's hands. Popular book stores/cafes/library reading rooms have become a community place for those who love the printed word. Food markets sell cookbooks and educational aids for children. Whole chapters are uploaded to the World Wide Web. Two of our three children now have a copy of my favorite Jewish cookbook, *Love and Knishes*, which was out-of-print, but available through a virtual marketplace of used bookstores.

Books have been an anchor for the Jews since the writing of the Torah almost 2500 years ago. Living in exile in Babylonia away from their ancestral land of Canaan, the rabbis were compelled to record their oral history and culture in order to preserve the identity of their people, Israel. In this written form, the early Hebrew Bible became the moral and legal basis for the Western world and earned Jews the honor of being named, "The People of the Book."

It is no wonder that a book is a metaphor in the most serious of holiday observances, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The objective of traditional Jews during this ten-day High Holiday is stated in the greeting *Le Shana Tikatevu. May you be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life.* In other words, may you be rewarded for your good behavior in the past year with the promise of good fortune in the upcoming year, and not be punished, along with the very wicked, by having your name written in the Book of Death.

As antiquated as this sounds, in fact the relationship between reward and punishment is deeply engrained in our psyche. How could it not be? Our materialistic world reinforces this notion. Horatio Alger's stories are archetypical of rewards for hard work. Positive reinforcement strategies with stickers, stars, and treats abound in the schools. Voters have enacted three strikes penalties for repeat criminal offenders.

In addition, our Jewish theology has the reward-punishment relationship woven throughout. It was in Abraham's bargain with God – You do good by God and God does good for you. The principle was housed in the Great Temple, where priests conducted sacrifices to the god in return for good crops and



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favor. Prophets cried out about it in the community, saying that all non-observers would bring ruin upon themselves and all of the Jewish people. Even the ultra-Orthodox rabbis reinforced it by declaring that the Holocaust was punishment brought upon the Jews by themselves not being observant enough. If you can't relate to these examples, have you ever heard a relative or acquaintance say, as was told to me, "See, God punished you for..."

Many have bought into this *grand illusion*, as Rabbi Sherwin Wine, founder of Secular Humanistic Judaism, calls it. [quote]"The *grand illusion*" is the belief that we live in a meaningful world, that the universe enforces the moral agenda of human beings, that the fates conspire to reward the good and punish the wicked, that the behavior of men and women ought to reflect the behavior of destiny." [end quote]

People who believe in this have been suffering under the notion that we live in a world that follows rules, where good things happen to good people because they deserve that destiny. To those who have this belief, the reciprocal is also true. In a world where unpredictable things happen, they experience anger and resentment, or despair and cynicism because they feel powerless to impact any change. They react to their circumstances as if they personally are being attacked and feel that the world is generally a hostile, dangerous place.

Rational thinkers know otherwise. They look at conditions as they appear, watch the consequences, and avoid the trap of comparing what is to what they want it to be. Will the CEO *goniffs* on Wall Street suffer financially like the folks we live among? Not necessarily. Will the mayors whose hands are caught in the cookie jar be able to bargain their way out of the jail sentence that any other citizen would incur? Probably. Do decent people who have lived an otherwise healthy and productive life suddenly get stopped by some misfortune? Yes.

This understanding was apparent to the rabbis around the year 200 C.E. There is a statement in a section of one of the Talmudic books written then called the Pirke Avot, or Ethics of the Fathers, which states, "It is not in our power to explain either the prosperity of the wicked or the sufferings of the righteous."

So what do we do? Intellectual analysis and reasoning may be one part of the solution. We can determine that a certain behavior is likely to draw a positive or negative consequence, and proceed to act



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accordingly. But in the grand scheme of directing ourselves to live in a manner that is consistent with our beliefs, reason alone just doesn't **feel** satisfying. This Rosh Hashanah, we need more than a general accounting of our deeds for the past 365 days. This time has to be about more than whether we acted ethically or responsibly. We are thrust into a very uncertain world once again, and we need to make sense out of how we are supposed to live. Just walk down the aisles of the neighborhood drug store or vitamin outlet to understand the anxiety and stress of living in today's world.

This opportunity for reflection and reassessment is precious; we must figure out how to use it wisely. We need the assurance that we are standing on solid ground, that our daily interactions and decisions truly reflect the person we want to be. Anyone who looks at us should be able to read the same internal story as we think we are showing externally. We need a book that speaks to our personal truth.

Recently a national bestseller called *The Last Lecture* caught my attention. It is a book that is the accounting of a man's life, written this year, while he is in his forties and dying of pancreatic cancer. His lecture at Carnegie-Mellon was part of a regular series intended to share their professors' wisdom and legacies with the world, written as if they were about to die. In Randy Pausch's case, it was true.

How would one go about such a task? The idea of one's final lecture to the world presents an interesting challenge. In planning the lecture, Pausch wondered what he had to say that would be unique to him. Here is what he said about the process,

"Though I've always had a healthy sense of self, I knew this lecture needed more than just bravado. I asked myself: 'What do I, alone, truly have to offer?' And then, there in that waiting room, I suddenly knew exactly what it was.

It came to me in a flash: Whatever my accomplishments, all of the things I loved were rooted in the dreams and goals I had as a child...and in the ways I had managed to fulfill almost all of them. My uniqueness, I realized, came in the specifics of all the dreams—from incredibly meaningful to decidedly quirky—that defined my forty-six years of life.

Sitting there, I knew that despite the cancer, I truly believed that I was a lucky man because I had lived out these dreams. And I had lived out my dreams, in great measure, because of things I was taught by all sorts of extraordinary people along the way. If I was able to tell my story with the passion I felt, my lecture might help others find a path to fulfilling their own dreams."



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Pausch cut through all the layers of intention and focused on the essence that made him incomparable. Finding that gave him the lessons to pass on as the father to his three young children. Finding a point of uniqueness in a world that brands people with labels and categories has to be difficult. Even harder is being able to celebrate that in your self. We must come to appreciate the special combination of upbringing and experience that makes us who we are, if we are ever to see ourselves as a valuable person unto ourselves. Rosh Hashanah gives us a chance to appraise whether our experience of life in the short span of one year, rather than a lifetime, complements our uniqueness. In the process, we are preparing to once again direct ourselves down a path toward living with meaning.

A lesson from Pausch's Last Lecture is to go back to the roots, to the place where our dreams were formed and review our journey from there. A careful and reflective assessment may help us discover that we didn't do so badly at experiencing our dreams. In that case we can celebrate our uniqueness with confidence. On the other hand, if we strayed far from our original intentions, we can plan how to catch the spirit of hope again. We can dedicate ourselves to finding the person we once dreamed of becoming. Either way, we will be able to use the time well in the next ten day of these High Holidays to put forward our direction and fire up our desire to get moving.

In my view, a meaningful life becomes a page-turner. The joy of living is like the joy of reading late into the night, when the reader is driven by the mystery and the passion of the story as it unfolds. A book like that happens due to the deliberate preparation of its author, setting the characters in the best time and place to help them develop their individuality. While the writer can fashion the plot to control the characters, the engaged reader discovers the events just as the character is experiencing them, and therein lies the connection. We may be sorry when the last page is read, but satisfied by the experience and inclined to look for other books by that author. Our pursuit for happiness and personal satisfaction will be the theme of the great story we are living.

-Madrikha Beverly Zarnow