

## ***A Bucket List for the Soul***

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Do you have a bucket list? What is on your bucket list? Surely you know what a bucket list is even if you are not sure what is on it. I assumed that the term 'bucket list' had been around forever, but it turns out that it really was just ten years ago when the term was popularized in the 2007 movie starring Jack Nicolson and Morgan Freeman. The movie itself was entitled "The Bucket List," and it told the story of terminal cancer patients as mismatched companions who ditch their treatment to hit the road. Their goal: to check off the items on their life-long wish lists before they die. Though the film itself earned mediocre reviews, the term became a hit. Almost a decade later, you will find over five *million* ideas on *bucketlist.org*, ranging from the expected trips to tourist destinations to performing outrageous feats like bungee jumping, cliff diving, and swimming with sharks. Want to spend less and stay close to home? You can have a mud fight or sleep under the stars, and – astonishingly – one and a half million people hope to learn to crack an egg with one hand before they expire.

This past year, when the fourth or fifth person told me what they had done or were about to do from their "bucket list," I started to pay closer attention, trying to understand what I found mildly discomfiting about this wildly popular cultural phenomenon.

All I needed for my investigation was the wisdom that a 2-year old can summons, for at 2 years old, you master that magnificent one-word question: "why?" Let's get in the car. "Why?" Because we're going to the park. "Why?" So you can ride your scooter. "Why can't I ride it at home?" "Why?" "Why?" That is what was missing from too many of the items on the bucket lists: *the why*.

Tonight is Kol Nidrei. The Book of Life is open and we imagine what might be codified by the end of Yom Kippur for the entire year to come, *if* we are blessed to live from this year until next. For the past 10 days, we have been composing our future, our *spiritual* "bucket list" for the heart and soul. On this holy day of Yom Kippur we bravely stare death in the face and say: "I am going to die. My time is limited. I am blessed with the freedom to choose, and *this* is how I want to fill the days that remain to me." These are weighty choices, demanding introspection and a persistent, repeated: '*why*'? Why this and not this? Will this enrich, enliven, and bring more meaning to my life? Will it make a difference for others? We can plan some adventurous highlights, a bucket-worthy climb or purchase, but at the New Year we are meant to ponder deeply and answer honestly: "How will I spend the days in-between the highlights? What is this time of my life for? And what is it NOT for?"

In truth, *how* to fill the time we are here with meaning is only part one of the question we ask ourselves tonight. Part two is: “**Who?**” as in ‘who will I be the rest of my life? When, as Jewish tradition commands, I take an honest accounting of my soul during these Days of Awe, am I satisfied with the balances on the ledger? Or could I be more honest, a better listener, less angry or impatient, more available to those I love, more kind? Our tradition does not demand perfection. But it does expect 100% effort. As we contemplate filling our Jewish bucket lists in the New Year, yes – by all means, put a trip to Israel on the list. While you are at it, put more time at the synagogue on your list, too. But without a doubt, by far, the #1 item on our Jewish bucket list needs to be: *to be better people in the New Year than we are right now.*

It was my wise 5<sup>th</sup> grade Religious School teacher, Mr. Gallinson, who first told our class that Judaism doesn’t believe in Heaven. He said that the Heaven we believe in is a Heaven on earth and that means we have to make our world into a heavenly place. We Jews believe that our actions in the here and now are what is most important. Our goal in life, he taught us, is to make for ourselves a *shem tov*, a good name, a name respected and beloved while we are here, and one remembered and cherished when we die. In Proverbs we read, “Choose to earn a good name; it is worth far more than silver or gold.” This was heavy stuff for a 5<sup>th</sup> grader. But not so difficult really. What we do matters. Who we are matters. What we choose to become matters. Today and every day.

At the same time that Mr. Gallinson was teaching his Religious School students the term *shem tov*, another Jewish teacher was saying the same thing with different words in the classroom of the folk song. In 1966, Phil Ochs sang:

*All my days won't be dances of delight when I'm gone  
And the sands will be shifting from my sight when I'm gone  
And I won't know the wrong from the right when I'm gone  
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here*

On Rosh Hashanah the great book was opened and at the end of Yom Kippur it will be sealed. These are the days in which we begin again to compose our lives. We live not so as to win a place in *Olam Habah*, the world to come, but to merit a place in *Olam Hazeah*, right here in this world, among those treasured by all who know them for their humility, their forgiving ways and their goodness. The Talmud teaches: “We live in deeds, not years.”

Rabbi Nachman, the beloved mystic and Hasidic sage taught, “All the world is a narrow bridge and the main thing, the essence...is *lo l'facheid klal* not to be afraid at all. Not to be afraid? Ever? In today’s world? With the news we are bombarded with every day? That seems unrealistic. And frankly, it is. It turns out that what Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav actually said was: *lo yitpached klal – yitpached*, a reflexive verb, meaning:

do not allow your fears to paralyze you. Fear: yes. Paralysis: No. Do not underestimate your strengths or your resilience, nor scare yourself into giving up.

The world can be a narrow bridge, but our essential task is to keep moving forward, summoning our spiritual courage, making and keeping a vow never to give up on ourselves, no matter our age or stage of life. We return here to the synagogue every New Year to remind ourselves that material success does not bestow upon us a *shem tov*, and that while travel to new destinations and quirky pursuits can add memorable adventures to our calendar -- the narrow bridge of life is mostly navigated in the sacred adventure of living every day. The simplest encounters, especially if we are mindful of their power, can bring new depth, breath and heft to life.

Our Jewish New Year is about time flowing – fast and finite—no moment ever to be relived, but at the same time every moment has the potential of lasting forever; every day, every place, every moment can bring us a discovery or a revelation that endures. Up against Jewish wisdom, the “bucket list” metaphor of singular experiences rings hollow. New York Times columnist David Brooks realizes this in a column he wrote recently where he proposes that we need to be writing Moral Bucket Lists, Bucket Lists that focus on values rather than vacations. Judaism itself says nothing about Bucket Lists per se, but it does even one better. How much more compelling to imagine that in the year 5778 we will choose – not to empty a bucket at all, but to fill - and refill – our *kos chaim*, our cup of life, with the why and the what and the who we still seek to be.

The writer of the Psalms walked through a valley darkened by the shadow of death yet still he wrote: *Kos Revayah*...“my cup runneth over.” When we read of that image at funerals, we are both praising the person who has died and summoning the will within ourselves to live more fully - - to fill our cups of life with gratitude and worthwhile deeds, with an honest appraisal of our shortcomings and a sincere commitment to bring forth our integrity, not our iniquity, into the world.

The neurologist and professor Oliver Sacks, probably most famous for his book AWAKENINGS which was made into a movie starring Robert DeNiro and Robin Williams, even upon receiving a fatal diagnosis at the age of 81, he kept on filling his cup, kept on answering all the “whys.” Shortly before he died he still managed to write these words: “I still feel intensely alive and I want and hope in the time that remains to deepen my friendships, to say farewell to those I love, to write more...to achieve new levels of understanding and insight. This will involve audacity, clarity and plain speaking, as I try to straighten my accounts with the world.”

May the wise doctor’s last prescription for himself inspire us as we enter this New Year, remembering that time is too precious to take for granted. Following his lead, let us name our goals with clarity and speak them out loud. Dare to share your Bucket List for the Soul with your loved ones. Dare to tell them what you intend to focus upon to

become a better person. Dare to do it for motivation and for courage. Kol Nidrei is about vows we have made and vows we have broken; let us dare to fill our Cups of Life now with the vows we want to commit to in the year to come.

How will you refill and transform your life? How will you plan to earn and burnish your *shem tov*, your good name? Be audacious or reserved or everything in-between; dare yourself to write down your plans, which makes them real and within your reach.

What might be on your spiritual bucket list for this year? Maybe your list will look something like mine: More patience and wisdom to answer our children's and grandchildren's constant questions. More interesting conversations with thoughtful people who challenge my ideas. More laughter because there is never enough. Less gossip because it is cruel. Being a better citizen of the world, taking more risks as an upstander, not a bystander. In some way every day to choose patience over frustration, empathy and understanding over quick judgments. And not to be afraid to try. Not to be afraid to fail. To fail and to find the determination to try again, this time, with more humility and more kindness. To try again...and again...while I'm here.

O God, on this holiest of evenings, we seek Your strength and love. Bless us, as drop by drop, we fill life's cup to overflowing with patience and wisdom and conversation that causes us to grow. Inspire us to fill our bucket lists with more kindness to others, more exchanges with strangers, more feeding of the poor, more words of encouragement. We know we will never complete our tasks in this world, so let us celebrate the power of the incomplete and the sacred resolve to keep crossing even the narrowest of bridges. May we live life unafraid, *hayom*, this day, now, in this moment... and in the next...and the next.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon  
May it be God's Will  
-AMEN-*