

Shortly, we will begin the Yizkor memorial service. For me, one of the benefits of the Yizkor service is the opportunity to see how I measure up against the greatness of those who came before me. One of the things that makes human beings different than other animals is our ability to think of ourselves as existential creatures, to question our existence and purpose.

Every person is unique. A midrash teaches that God stamps out human beings from an identical mold just like a mint stamps out coins, yet each of God's creations, unlike coins, is different from all others.

At Yizkor, we remember those who came before us and learn from their uniqueness. Each of us has some particular talent or interest that we can potentially contribute to the world.

Ours is a tradition that understands the world by means of questions. We value learning, we value the hiddush, the novel and innovative approach to understanding our texts. We write commentaries on commentaries.

Ours is a prophetic tradition. We do not hold knowledge to be secret - we proclaim our sacred texts, reading Torah publicly every week, studying our sacred texts, and using them to guide our lives. We are partners with God in running the world.

Last spring a young lady from an Orthodox high school gave a commencement speech in which she quoted Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Less Traveled." Rabbi Avi Shafran, listening, thought that she was headed towards a cliché ridden speech about the benefits of individualism and independence, of taking the road less traveled. However, the young lady instead took issue with the idea that the less traveled path is always the more valiant choice. The life-path that she and her classmates had come to value most was a road pointedly well-worn, trodden by countless Jewish generations. Judaism is as much about cherishing and preserving time-honored paths as it is about blazing new ones. The prophetic voice calls us not to follow every whim of pop culture, but to seek out and follow the path of our ancestors, actual and spiritual, to the sacred.

We do not reject modernity - we engage it. We use our intellectual gifts to expand our knowledge of Torah and we believe that the tools of scholarship, history, archeology, science, biology, physics, and literature, help us on that quest. Halakha done well is both deeply rooted in tradition and at the same time infused with creativity. It is a process of seeking holiness.

My colleague Rabbi Sue Fendrick noted a fascinating connection between a teaching of Aristotle about excellence and a Jewish approach to kedushah, holiness.

Aristotle said, "Excellence is an art won by training and habituation. We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but rather we have those because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit."

Judaism might replace the word excellence with the word kedushah, and say, "Kedushah is a quality won by training and habit. We do not act in a holy manner because of some inherent quality of holiness, but rather we are holy because we have acted rightly. We are what we repeatedly do. Kedushah is not an act or a quality but a habit.

These are thoughts that run through my head during Yizkor -- Each of us has potential we have not even dreamt of yet. Did the people we remember die before living up to their potential? What did they do well? What could they have done differently to have lived more fulfilled lives? What can we learn from them?

Michael Gelb, author of *Discover your Genius*, wrote, "We were all born into this world as geniuses -- just ask your mother. Your brain has 100 billion neurons that can not only learn and

store information, but make connections in the most astounding ways.”

Some people use their talents well, others squander their gifts. One of the Yizkor readings reminds us that God created us “little less than angels.” Angels are perfect beings, divine servants and messengers, but have no will of their own. Why do they need it? They are already perfect - they do only and exactly what God says. We are created less than perfect - and with the freedom to create ourselves. We have the freedom to use the Torah as a Divine guide to bring more holiness into the world - but each of us does that in a way suited to our own strengths. Someone talented at building things might volunteer for Habitat for Humanity. Someone who enjoys talking on the phone might make daily or weekly calls to check up on senior members of the community. Someone who enjoys cooking might prepare food for Kiddush or other holiday celebrations, or volunteer at God’s Kitchen. You know what your gifts are - you have the choice to strive towards perfection by using them to enhance your community.

You also have the choice to accept the limitations of your body as a gift, rather than as an infirmity.

David Ulrich, a photographer, was chopping wood and a small branch snapped back at his face and pierced his eye. Surgery saved his life, but could not save his eye. As a man who made a living using his eyes to take pictures, he was distraught. After a period of adjustment, though, he learned to use his one remaining eye for sight, but he also learned to see, to be aware, with his whole body. As a result, he became a much more sensitive photographer.

In 1801, at the age of 30, Beethoven wrote to his friends about his worry of becoming deaf. In 1802, he wrote a famous text which expressed his disgust at the unfairness of life: that he, a musician, could become deaf was something he did not want to live through. But music made him carry on. And he wrote that he knew that he still had many other musical domains to explore, to discover, and to pass on. Beethoven did not commit suicide, rather, knowing that his disability was getting worse and worse, he threw himself into his greatest works.

David Ulrich, wrote, “The urge to create - to use our minds, hearts, and hands in unison; to work with materials; to express ourselves and our observations, our deepest longings, our greatest aspirations, our joys and sorrows - is one of the basic human impulses.”

We don’t know what our unique destiny is unless we explore and challenge ourselves for our entire life. At no point in our life have we fully developed our creative potential. Even if we lived *biz a hundert un tzvanzik, ad mea v’esrim*, until the age of 120, with perfect faculties, we would still have more we could learn and do and assimilate and integrate and teach and create.

When Rabbi Zusya was dying, his students asked him if he was afraid that God would ask him at the final judgment if he had been as great as Moses. Zusya said no, he was afraid that God was going to ask him if he had fulfilled the potential of being Zusya.

I am inspired by people who return to school later on in life to complete or extend their education. Sometimes they are changing careers; sometimes they are stay at home moms whose children are no longer at home. They have taken a look at their lives, and decided that they want to be different or more than they are right now. In a Dale Carnegie course for which I am now acting as a graduate assistant leader, I see people focused on learning and growing and changing their lives in dramatic ways in the course of only a few months.

How do you learn to swing a golf club or play a piece on the piano -- by practicing the motion or the piece, until it is unconscious. Your brain develops new connections, and

eventually you can play golf or the piano without consciously reviewing each move of your body or fingers.

We know that music has the potential to reach and unlock creative areas of our brain. The Kol Nidre piece we heard last night as well as other pieces of liturgy chanted by the cantor are an emotional experience that may have little to do with the meaning of the words. Most of us have overly intellectualized the experience of prayer and music, which is really a shame. If you have ever seen my son Solomon listening to a piece of music that particularly touches him, his whole body, from his legs to his arms and hands, to his head, vibrates. It reminds me of what happens to a fine crystal glass when you play just the right note on a violin. The sound waves from the violin cause the glass to vibrate in sympathy.

How do you learn to vibrate in sympathy with God's voice to help you realize your potential? I believe that the ability to perceive God lies within each one of us. It is possible to tune your soul to vibrate in concert with God or Torah. Just as one may take music appreciation courses and learn to understand the intricacies of Beethoven and enhance one's enjoyment of his music; so too may one study Torah and other Jewish texts, learn to recognize God's voice, and find the inspiration to reach your potential as a human being.

Let me share with you an example from my world - how I connect myself to a higher level of being through the study of Torah. When I sit down to write a d'var Torah, I read the text, often look at another book or two, and wait for something to happen. If nothing happens, I read more. Eventually, something strikes me. In the end, I often feel that I haven't chosen the piece of Torah -- it has chosen me.

D'var Torah writing is kind of like making soup. I assemble the ingredients. A few verses, a few texts, maybe a newspaper article or a book or a remembered quotation all get thrown into the pot. I let the material stew around in my head. Like soup, the longer it cooks the better it becomes. I have a powerful sense many weeks that I have not written the d'var Torah; rather I am just a means of transmission through which Torah flows. I have occasionally said to people, "If you liked my d'var Torah, the credit goes to the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence, speaking through me. If you didn't like it, blame me for my poor transmission of God's voice." The process is not entirely unconscious, but to a certain extent the less my own ego is involved the more pure the message.

My suggestion to you is to delve into the words of our prayers and our sacred texts. Immerse yourself in them; meditate on them. Learn to hear God's voice through them. During the Yizkor prayers, perhaps ask your ancestors for help and guidance.

If you strive for your maximum creative potential, if you live your lives as fully as possible, if you open up your souls to your highest potential, as Jews and as unique human beings, then God will work through you, telling you what you are supposed to do with your life. All it takes is some quiet introspection, some tuning of your soul. All it takes is for you to quiet down your own life enough to hear the Divine voice, in whatever form it may take. All it takes is Yizkor, the ability to remember the unique gifts of those who preceded you as well as those gifts that are within you to share with the world.