

On these Day of Awe, as we focus ourselves on the idea of God as judge, I'm supposed to be reminding you to recommit yourselves to our covenant with God, to realign your lives with Torah, and to use this to restore your relationships with people you may have wronged. Basically, I'm supposed to talk to you about what it means to live a good life according to our Jewish traditions. So here goes!

It goes without saying that Judaism these days is increasingly revealing itself to be a difficult path to follow. This is no surprise for those who have lived their lives as Jews. In our historical memory, we have been taught over and over again to have no expectation that we'll live easy, distress-free, lives. We learn to expect to encounter difficulties and experience pain, so we develop the resilience to overcome obstacles. Our system is based not on rights and privileges, but on obligations. We expect to take care of others, so we live our lives in a community of people that we take care of and that take care of us. We live our lives according to the dictum of Pirke Avot [1:3]:

Do not be like servants who serve the master in the expectation of receiving a reward; rather, be like servants who serve the master without the expectation of receiving a reward.

In American or western terms, living a good life tends to be defined as having the time and resources to live life doing what makes us happy; that is, doing what we want. It is a kind of inward-focused life, focused on pleasing oneself above all else. Such a life might be purely selfish, cultivating pleasure for oneself while leaving in one's wake the neglect and distress of others. But a self-focused life is not necessarily an inherently bad life. Such a person might be primarily concerned with their own happiness, but might aim to make their spouse happy because that gives them pleasure. They can be great parents and friends, because they derive enjoyment from doing things for their children and their friends. From a Jewish lens, this person is living a good life because we tend to believe that God judges actions over intent. If one's actions serve others and don't cause harm, they would generally be judged well.

But in Jewish terms, living the good life might be better understood as living an outward-focused life, a mitzvah-focused life. Rather than living focused on self, one's life is primarily focused on the other. Such a person does mitzvot not primarily because they give them pleasure, but simply because they are a mitzvah. One might give tzedakah and do various kinds of volunteer work because it lifts others up, not because it gives them pleasure to do the work. The work of the Hevra Kadisha is sometimes held up as a prime example of this. Most people find the work of cleaning a dead body physically and emotionally uncomfortable, if not outright painful. It is called *hesed shel emet*, the truest form of love, because in a sense it is a thankless job; the person you are doing the work for will never thank you. You do it for the sake of the mitzvah, love of God, dedication to the community, you take care of the bodies of people you love and people you hate, people who served the community and people who never gave a dime, with equal dedication.

The outward facing good life is about putting God first, others first, the needs of the community first, the mitzvah first, and ourselves second. It might seem that this perspective would produce a community of unhappy people who never get to do what their hearts desire. The reality is the opposite. Traditional religious communities tend to identify on the high end of the happiness scale, as does the State of Israel. It aligns with the Talmudic perspective:

*Gadol hametzuveh ve'oseh mi'she'eino metzuveh ve'oseh*, "Greater is the one who is commanded and does it, than one who is not commanded and still does it" (Kiddushin 31a).

Living this kind of mitzvah-directed life gives our lives meaning, which leads to greater contentment and happiness. Deuteronomy tells us that the good life is based on good actions, defined as faithfully following the covenantal instructions from God. But there is a deeper conversation here about how we understand and follow Torah. Is the good life good because we automatically assume that anything God said is good, or is there some underlying principle of goodness that prompted God to include these actions in the category of mitzvah?

In other words, is it good because God said so, or does God say so because it is good? This is an important question because the first position, that anything God says in the Torah is automatically good, renders our own sense of good and bad irrelevant. We do mitzvot because God said so and they are inherently good. The latter position, on the other hand, assumes that there is an objective sense of morality that caused a certain set of actions to be chosen by God as mitzvot, or to be identified by Torah as God-commanded actions. It leaves open the possibility that in an ancient social context, the Torah identified certain actions as good, but as we evolve as partners to God in creation in our own social context, we might no longer identify those actions as good.

A good life is one in which we live out our purpose for being alive. Each of us might have specific talents or tasks that we share with the world around us. We might be great at making matches, giving tzedakah, throwing parties, writing poetry, being funny, cooking, serving, taking care of animals, teaching ... And we have a larger purpose in the world stemming from our Jewish peoplehood. I believe that there is a reason that Judaism exists in our world, that it has a purpose for existing. I believe that Jews bring something into the world that no one else is doing. Collectively, we have a unique multi-layered mission and purpose.

- Jews gave the world the idea of monotheism. Our role is to teach the world how not to bow down to false gods and ideologies and to resist tyranny.
- Jews gave the world the idea of the weekend. Our role is to observe the Sabbath and show the world how to rest and be at one with creation.
- Judaism exists not simply to make you better people by following its system of mitzvot and spiritual discipline, but also to be a light showing the way to the rest of the world.
- We exist to show the world that it is possible to live sacred lives while also continually learning and interpreting and reinterpreting our sacred text.
- We exist to be an example of what it means to faithfully live out one's covenantal mission.
- We exist to demonstrate resilience and trust in God in the face of adversity.
- And we exist not to be afraid of making mistakes, but rather to take responsibility for our errors and do teshuvah.

As long as the world is dominated by bloodthirsty, tyrannical regimes, as long as there are people mired in poverty without enough food to eat, without sufficient shelter, we need Judaism to remind ourselves and others that we are in partnership with God, responsible to imitate God's actions and fill the world with love and light.

As long as people of the earth continue to plunder the resources of our planet, we need to bring our Jewish resources to bear on teaching people to be good stewards of God's creation.

Living the good life is an impossibly big task. No single person can solve these problems. Our tradition understands this: Rabbi Tarfon reminds us that it is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it [Avot 2:16]. We have God and we have Torah and we have an assurance that in the end, we'll be rewarded for living that good, Jewish, life.