

## Meaning

This summer, my seven year old nephew Callan, came from Denver to stay with my partner Tali and I for a week. For us two thirty-somethings who live alone, anticipating the visit of a first grader was a big deal. Yes, Callan's arrival was marked with much fanfare. We created a little bedroom for him in our home office. We bought food we thought a growing boy would like: turkey slices, Gatorade, baby carrots, nacho lunchables. We planned activities, signed him up for Camp Sholom, coordinated schedules, and made extensive lists. We talked about house rules. And so, when we picked up Callan from the airport on June 21, we were ready.

I am a planner. And, I spend my days working with youth. But, here is what I could never have anticipated about the visit. I never knew how much meaning this child could add to my daily life.

Mundane activities were transformed. My hour and a half commute, which I usually experience as one of the "compromises" of life, all of a sudden took on new charm. Callan was enthralled with the commuter train, let alone the Los Angeles Metro Red Line.

Every detail in life was noticed. He delighted in them all. And, through his eyes I saw my world anew.

After I put Callan to bed at night, I would stand at my kitchen window and pack his lunch. As I did so, I nightly felt my breath steady and my heart soar. Never before did food preparation feel like such a holy act. As I carefully wrapped his sandwich, chose his drink, found a special dessert, and gingerly placed a napkin in the bag, I felt something open inside me. I felt a sense of purpose, as I dedicated myself, fully, to someone else.

My reaction to Callan's visit brought me to the book *Man's Search for Meaning*, by the philosopher Viktor Frankl, who lived from 1905 to 1997. Frankl, an internationally known psychiatrist, is recognized for developing logotherapy, a revolutionary approach to psychology. At the heart of logotherapy is the belief that the primary motivational force in a person's life is their search for meaning.

But, Viktor Frankl is not just another academic... Indeed, Viktor Frankl endured years of unspeakable horror in Nazi Concentration Camps during World War II. Miraculously, Frankl survived the war and wrote about his experiences. Yes, Frankl explains that Maslow got it wrong. Frankl, who lived without sufficient food and water for years, came to realize that Maslow's hierarchy of needs was faulty.

A person could live without almost anything, except meaning. More than sufficient food, more than sufficient water, more than sufficient shelter. Meaning.

Frankl explains that a person can find meaning through three different avenues: (1) By encountering someone or something, (2) by doing or creating something, and (3) by the attitude they take toward life.

Right now, we find ourselves at a critical moment in our lives. We find ourselves on the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of Tishrei, the second day of the New Year, 5769, and each one of us is being called upon by our tradition, by our community, and by our God to consider what this year will mean for us. What will be the purpose of living out the next minutes, the next hours, the next days? We are reminded on Rosh Hashanah that our lives have the potential to be sweet, but that we must make them so. And, so I wonder, how can we achieve this? By exploring Frankl's three avenues toward meaning, we may just find our answer.

### **1. We make meaning by encountering someone or something**

What does it mean to encounter someone? It means to love them fully and selflessly. What I experienced during my sandwich-making epiphany was exactly what Frankl describes as *encountering* another person.

To truly encounter another person means to share of your core self and to allow the other person to share of their core. To encounter someone requires awareness and intention. We can encounter other people in study and in friendship. We can encounter our friends, our spouses, our children. When we talk about building community at TBS, we are not just talking about making time to socialize, we are talking about creating opportunities for all of us to make meaning in our lives. This year's adult education program at TBS is aptly titled "Our Search for Meaning." We have designed a curriculum that strives to provide opportunities for deep encounters, deep encounters that lead to meaning.

Meaning can also come from encountering life. From connecting with nature. From hearing good music. From contemplating beautiful art. From enjoying a good film. Or, from looking out the window of a train and marveling at what passes by.

Encountering takes time. If life is only spent rushing from place to place, from have-to to have-to, from work to home and back again, we leave little time for encountering. Our society, I believe, devalues encountering. It prizes busy-ness and seriousness and focused-ness. The cultural message around us seems to say: Stay at work longer, check your blackberry more, and hustle quicker. It doesn't say: take longer at the dinner table and make more coffee dates. It doesn't say: go to an art exhibit and hear a concert.

"*Hayom harat olam*," This is the day of the world's birth. This is the day for us to remember that the world—the people around us and all of nature—was created to be encountered. When we do *teshuvah*, when we turn ourselves toward a more essential way of living, we add meaning to our lives.

### **2. We make meaning by doing something**

Every other month, TBS congregants join together to volunteer at a local soup kitchen. When a family signs up to help, I give them a short shopping list and ask them to come ready to prepare and serve a meal for about 75 people. This meal, called Sunday Night Together, which is organized by folks at the First Presbyterian Church of Orange, is always served with dignity.

When the TBS volunteers arrive at the church with bags in hand, we immediately get to work. We set up tables and chairs. We warm food, chop salads, place fruit and sandwiches and bread in bowls. Inevitably, everyone is sweating 20 minutes in. We soak ourselves washing dishes.

Each time I have brought a group to a Sunday Night Together dinner, I have noticed how profoundly the experience moves them. This deed brings meaning to their lives.

My dad is a blacksmith, not by vocation, but by avocation. When I go to Missouri to visit, I hear my father downstairs in his workshop bang banging away. He always walks upstairs dirty, created knife in hand, with his face beaming. My father knows a secret to life not experienced by many. He has found a deed, an activity, that brings meaning to him.

The deed that we do is immaterial. I can tell you with one hundred percent certainty that blacksmithing would bring little meaning to me. This is why Frankl says there is no one meaning to life. Each of us must seek out that which brings meaning to us.

So, join us at TBS for an adult cooking class. Join us at TBS for an adult art class. Make a gift for someone, for yourself. Undertake a home improvement project. Volunteer. Do something. Who knows how it might affect you?

### **3. We make meaning by the attitude we take toward life**

Before Viktor Frankl was transported from a Concentration Camp in Bohemia to Auschwitz, he had written a manuscript, his life's work, which outlined many of his theories about logotherapy. He had clutched the manuscript tightly, hoping it might be spared. We all know the end of the story. The manuscript was taken. But, Frankl was saved. Frankl believes the memory of that manuscript saved him in the Camp. He lived for that manuscript. He found scraps of paper and attempted to reconstruct his theories. As he lived through unthinkable horrors, he attempted to rework his ideas. Frankl was not alone in his attitude.

All around him, Frankl saw others who lived for something. They lived for someone they loved. They lived for a hobby they once enjoyed. They lived for art. They lived for pleasure.

By watching what the people around him lived for, Frankl realized: It was a person, a thing, a deed that brought meaning to people's lives. There was insufficient food, there was insufficient water, there was no dignity, but there was meaning. And, it was the meaning people found that helped them to survive. Life can offer us pain, as easily as it offers us joy. Frankl teaches that it is up to us to decide how we will respond to what life gives us.

There are those who see daily life as an opportunity and a challenge. Despite the pain. Despite the hardship. These people see life as a test of their inner strength. They seek to grow spiritually

beyond themselves (Frankl 93). Frankl writes, "One could make a victory of [their] experiences, turning life into an inner triumph, or one could ignore the challenge and simply vegetate" (Frankl 93).

This, I believe is our great challenge in life. Jewish tradition pushes us to move beyond the urge just to vegetate. We have the power to decide how we will live our lives and how we will respond to what life brings us. "Make time holy," our tradition tells us. Mark the seasons with holy days. Join your community in prayer and fellowship.

The Psalmist declares, "Teach us to number our days, so that we will become wise" (Psalm 90:12). Our tradition has long understood that when we slow down and reflect on what each day brings us, we feel a sense of connectivity to the divine and a deeper understanding of the world.

On Rosh Hashanah, our daily numbering begins anew. On Rosh Hashanah, we have the opportunity to return and count again. On Rosh Hashanah, both the gates to heaven and the gates to our hearts are open wide.

How will we live our lives in the days, weeks, and months to come? What will 5769 bring us? Today we are told: You can create that which you live for. Bring meaning to your moments—through relationship, through action, through reaction. Again and again today we have sung a simple word: HaYom. Today. Today is the day the world was created and today is the day we are called to new action.

A life lived passively has little opportunity for meaning. So seize your days and number them well. As the great Rabbi Hillel teaches: "V'im lo achshav, eimatai?" "If not now, when?"