

2nd Day Rosh Hashanah Sermon

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Are you really happy? Do you get up in the morning looking forward to going to work? Or does each day blend one into the other as you count down to your next day off?

I'd like to share with you a story about my husband, Daniel. In 2005 he began working for a start-up software company. For those of you who can relate to this experience, it wouldn't be a surprise to you that Daniel worked long hours. His normal day started at 5 in the morning and ended around 1 or 2 in the morning. Aside from taking a few breaks to go to the gym or eat meals, he worked all the time, putting in 80-100 hours a week. Our cramped one-bedroom apartment became hijacked by Daniel's work and I found myself unable to watch TV or talk on the phone because of his perpetual phone conferences with his colleague, Brian, or his boss. And how can I forget to mention the time when I woke up to an empty bed because he had fallen asleep working late in a rented office space. To my relief, THANK GOD, the company shut down after a year and Daniel returned to work for a more established corporation.

I like to refer to that period of our lives as "software purgatory," but Daniel sees it otherwise. He reminisces about the experience as being the most fulfilling time in his career. He learned about software architecture and vision at exponential rates. He had also enjoyed working so closely with his friend, Brian, who challenged him and shared in his excitement over new technologies.

Soon after returning to a more typical corporation Daniel's demeanor changed. He would come home from work unhappy and became disinterested in every part of his life. It was as if the fire inside him had been extinguished. Although Daniel's work was undemanding and the schedule was flexible, he wasn't content. He wanted more out of his career. He wanted to vision, explore, and collaborate on innovative software solutions. Daniel was also frustrated by his colleagues. They didn't share his mentality, and only did whatever was necessary to get the job done in the shortest amount of time. Their minds and hearts were no longer invested in their work. Any excitement or curiosity they had for software development was long gone.

Daniel is probably only one of the many people who have been unhappy in their work. In his witty memoir about depression and recovery, *Rage Against the Meshugenah*, our own TBS congregant, Danny Evans, relates his frustrations with a number of jobs he had, that held no value to him—jobs that he felt undermined who he was and wanted to be as a professional. He writes:

A frustration was building inside me, and the more I considered it, the more disappointed I became about how I had been lying to myself. For years I called myself a writer. That's how I introduced myself to people at parties. It sounded nice. Sophisticated. But it had become painfully evident that the descriptor was a lie. Yes, I wrote for a living, but the brochures and flyers I created at my job were hardly the trappings of a "real" writer.

You would think that with our economy in crises and unemployment at an all-time high Americans would be more content with their work than ever before. Shouldn't those of us who are still employed just be happy to have a job? According a number of recent surveys, no. In a survey conducted by snagajob.com, only 41% of workers indicated that their job brought them some satisfaction.

It is no surprise that a survey by Adecco Group of North America found 66% of participants to be dissatisfied with their salaries. But an even higher number of participants--77% -- indicated that discontentment with their employers stemmed from a lack of shared vision and opportunities for learning and growth. In other words, people want to engage their minds in their work and find value in what they do. A recession cannot change the fact that people want to learn—to be inspired! We want our work to hold meaning and to enhance our lives.

Since we were kids, the value Jewish tradition places on education and intellectual curiosity was drilled into us. In addition to an appreciation for food and observance of holidays, education—both secular and religious—has long been part of the initiation process into the Jewish people hood. We can't deny that it's every mother or Bubbe's joy to brag about the intellectual accomplishments of her children or grandchildren.

Our value of learning originally stems from the Tanak—the Jewish bible. In Proverbs 6:23 we learn:

כִּי יֵרַ מְצֻנָה נְתוּרָה אֹר

“a mitzvah is a lamp, and the Torah a light.” The wealth of wisdom that Torah brings is meant to illuminate our lives, help us understand the world around us, and ultimately, bring us happiness.

Have you ever wondered where we get this {point to upper lip}? The Talmud tells a beautiful midrash to explain this indentation we have above our lips: In Tractate Niddah we learn that before we are born, there is an angel who shines a lamp over our heads “with which we learn the entire Torah and see from one end of the universe to the other.” We learn everything there is to know about the Torah and life. All possible knowledge is ours. Right before we are born into this world, the angel strikes our upper lip, causing us to immediately forget all of the wisdom we gained while in the womb. We spend our lives trying to recover the knowledge that we once had—it still hides deep within our souls. For this reason, human beings thrive on discovery. With each new gem of understanding we retain, a flame of light is returned to us.

If you are not convinced of the enlightening effect learning has on the human spirit, just spend some time with an infant or young child. My daughter, Adina, is almost 7 months old. For her, each day is filled with new amusements and learning. About a month ago she discovered her feet for the first time. Grabbing her left foot first, she examined it intently, her eyes opening wide as she moved her legs back and forth. In the moment when she realized that she had complete control over her foot, she squealed with delight and smiled with excitement. Something so simple brought her so much joy. Young children are no exception to this phenomenon. They come home excited to share what they learned in school or observed while playing outside; their eyes light up with satisfaction.

Where is our light? Do we approach our daily activities and jobs with passion, curiosity, and a willingness to grow intellectually? Do we see what we do for a living as potential for learning about ourselves and the world around us? Sure, most of us need our jobs to support our families, but do we see our work as a means to an end, or as a process?

There’s a tale about a widget maker who works in a widget factory. He sits in the middle of the factory line, his main responsibility to add a watch-a-mah-call-it to each widget as it passes along. He doesn’t know what the other workers are doing or what the final product actually looks like, but it is of no concern to him. The widget maker’s job is mundane—he makes the same action over and over again each minute of each hour of each day. There is not much to learn from it. While on the line, he

daydreams to escape from his job that makes him bored and unhappy. A few weeks go by and the head of the factory announces that several of the recent shipments were returned by customers. Not all of the widgets worked properly because widget-maker and some of the other men on the line made careless errors, causing the entire product to malfunction.

The moral of the story? The widget maker saw his role on the factory line as boring and insignificant, which lead to mistakes that destroyed the entire product. Concerned only with his specific duty—he didn't understand the value of his specific role or how his work related with others. His boredom and unhappiness led him to be an unproductive worker.

Now, granted, the widget maker's supervisors didn't take the time to excite the workers or provide them with true collaborative opportunities, but let's be realistic here. Our employers won't always be the ones to inspire us about our work or keep us happy—especially if you are working in corporate America. The push has to come first from us.

During the High Holidays the shofar blasts calling out to us, “Wake up, awake from your slumber and choose life!” When we settle for the status quo, are we really awake? Are we cheating ourselves of happiness? We may not always like what we do for a living, but let's be realistic—those of us who work are not going to dance into the office tomorrow and quit our jobs because we would rather be happy than employed. But what we CAN do is find ways to rekindle the light inside of us. Even those of us who enjoy what we do need a little push once in a while to get our minds rejuvenated.

My husband addressed his unhappiness by a new found love for reading; he now also shares his ideas and software development on a technology wiki with other programmers. Danny Evans created an award-winning blog called DadGoneMad and has pursued his ultimate dream with the publication of his first book. You can find colleagues to share ideas with over coffee or take an extended education course at a local university. Study some Torah or Jewish rituals in an adult education course here at the temple. Or perhaps you can dive into a new hobby unrelated to your career to expand your mind and quench your intellectual curiosity. The sky is the limit.

A few minutes ago, we spoke the words of the Misheberach—the prayer for healing:

*May God who blessed our ancestors bless our dear ones who seek speedy healing bestow upon them a complete healing...healing of **spirit** and healing of body.*

We tend to pray for those who are physically ill, and often forget that the Mi Sheberach is also a blessing for the healing of our spirits, our minds. We don't talk enough about our spirit and intellect and how we can heal these necessary parts of ourselves. It is the intellect that God gave us that differentiates us from the rest of creation, so shouldn't we take utmost care of it?

On this Rosh Hashanah ask yourself: how can I spark the light of learning back into my life this year? What do I need to do to begin to mend the pieces of my mind and spirit that have been long forgotten?

I conclude with a blessing from the weekday Amidah:

אֱתָהּ חוֹנֵן לְאָדָם דָּעוּת, וּמְלַמֵּד לְאֶנוּשׁ בִּינָה. חַנּוּן מֵאֲתֶרְךָ דַּעַה, בִּינָה וְהַשְׁכֵּל. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, חוֹנֵן הַדַּעַת.

You graciously endowed man with wisdom and teach insight to humans. Endow us with knowledge, understanding, and enlightenment. Blessed are you, God, Giver of wisdom.

And let us say:

Amen