

The Ultimate To-Do List

Whether or not to take the job at Wilshire Boulevard Temple was a huge decision. I had been working at Temple Isaiah for eight years and before that, spent two years at the University of Pennsylvania Hillel. Before accepting the job, I did a lot of soul-searching, serious due-diligence into the inner workings of this place, and spent many hours with Julia discussing our lives, our priorities, our children, and our dreams. The transition has come with many logistical and emotional changes. Instead of all three of our children at one school, now two are at Brawerman and one remains elsewhere. Like all families, as the kids get older, the activities change and grow in intensity and therefore, our new Sunday night routine where Julia and I assess the week's schedule of activities and appointments with our color-coded calendars that light up our computer screens like rainbows. I've started getting up at 5:45 most mornings so I can get in a little exercise and most importantly, I've started building in a little time each week when I have no agenda, no plans. It's not enough, but at least I'm working on muting the madness of the daily grind.

But it doesn't take a new job to feel overwhelmed. Everyone I know is trying to balance more than they can handle. We're overwhelmed by our to-do list. We're more stressed than calm; more chaotic than at peace; more anxious than contemplative; life feels more frustrating than it is fun.

The rabbis of old had trouble balancing their lives too – the study of Torah, the needs of their ever-expanding families, the fact that most of them also had other careers besides being a rabbi - it would be as if the WBT clergy also worked at Home Depot, served as doctors in the hospital, ran a business, or oversaw a farm operation. It all made life as hectic then as it is now. Yet somehow those ancient rabbis managed to lead spiritual lives in ways that are so elusive to many of us. How?

If you want the ultimate guide to this essentialist lifestyle; a life where you can focus on what matters the most and not succumb to the unending tug of distractions and detractors, all you need to do is ask four simple questions the ancient rabbis asked themselves, especially at this time of the year. They're the questions the ancient rabbis imagined they, and we, are asked at the gates of heaven. It was their attempt to narrow down all the responsibilities and expectations and hopes and fears we face into a concise guide to a meaningful life. And when I think about my own life and how I try to shape the decisions I make, the values I hope to live by and teach my children, and the strategies I want to utilize to determine my priorities, I find these four questions the most helpful of all.

According to the rabbis, the first question we will be asked when we reach heaven is “Did you set aside time for learning Torah?”

Torah study has a branding problem. People think it requires either a strong background in Hebrew, theology, Jewish history, or that it is only for those who live ‘religious’ lives – the Orthodox community, the rabbis, the people who find ancient texts alluring. But remember, the translation of the word ‘torah’ is ‘teaching’ – the Torah is really our tradition's way of creating a value system based on stories, ideas, and concepts to inform our everyday decision-making – not just the decisions of thousands of years ago, but today.

When I think about Pharaoh and study the stories of Moses or King David, it helps me understand and digest the politics of today, because the complexities and frustrations that so

many of us feel, regardless of our political leanings, have played out before and we can turn to stories from our tradition to help us understand how to engage in the conversation today.

If you want to figure out strategies to unplug and take a break from the unending e-mails, all you have to do is spend some time studying the Torah's concept and teachings about Shabbat.

When I read the Song of Songs, our tradition's love poetry, I'm reminded of how I'm supposed to show my love to my wife, Julia, and when I'm faced with extended family drama, I journey back to the relationships of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah and it makes me feel so much better!

When I think about all the issues we face as a nation and a world, I'm reminded of the Torah's ethical mandates to love the stranger, be generous with the poor, to pursue justice.

When you make time to learn Torah, you see the world on a much deeper level. This year, I want to learn Torah with you. When the holidays are over, you're going to receive an e-mail from me with a link to sign up for a cup of coffee, on me, near either campus, and we'll have the opportunity to sit down and talk a little Torah.

The first question we're asked is "Did you set aside time to study Torah?" and the second question the rabbis imagined we will be asked is "Did you devote yourself to family?" The literal translation alludes to your family being your 'occupation', as in "Did you make your family your occupation, your job?"

Many of us work outside the home, but the most important job in our life is our family. When I sit down with a family and prepare them to bury a loved one, the conversation centers on the meaningful memories and poignant stories of their loved one's life. Woven into the tapestry of the deep sadness and loss is a shining love and happiness that emerges as people reminisce about the family vacations, the odd quirks, the inside jokes, the things they learned by watching their loved one interact with friends and family. I have never had a family tell me that they wished their loved one had spent more time at work and less time with them.

I grew up playing baseball and football through high school and despite my parents being divorced and my father living overseas or in another city at times, there was always someone from my family at my games. And there were a lot of games. My wife forwarded me an article recently about attending children's sports games and the author wrote, "I don't remember a lot of the birthday gifts I got growing up or cookies I ate before dinner, but I vividly remember my mom and dad, in their work suits and jackets, walking into every game I ever played." Showing up and being present for our family does more than we can ever really appreciate and it is the foundation of any meaningful legacy we hope to create.

To review, the first two questions are "Did you set aside time to study Torah?" and "Did you devote yourself to family?"

The third question is "Were you honest in business?"

Our work is not supposed to be our life; it's not supposed to define us. And yet, when we get to heaven, we'll be asked about our work. Because the question, 'were you honest in business?' isn't really a question about our work at all. It's a question about our ethics; our value system; how we treat other people; how we spend our money; how we define 'success' for ourselves and our family.

The Haftorah we'll read next week during Yom Kippur talks all about this. It's a passage from the prophet Isaiah in which God talks about people crying out and wondering why their prayers are not being answered even though they are fasting and doing what they're supposed to be doing. God reminds them, and us, that going through the motions isn't good enough, "because on your fast day you see to your business and oppress all your laborers," says Isaiah, "is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies?...No, this is the fast I desire; to unlock the fetters of wickedness...to let the oppressed go free...to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin." When we do those things, God says, that's when we'll start to see things turn around in our own lives and in the lives of those around us.

The final question the rabbis say we will be asked when we arrive in heaven is "Did you anticipate redemption?" Traditionally, this hints at the belief in the messiah, but I see this as a question about hope. "Did you live with hope?"

It's hard to have hope when we're feeling swamped 24/7; when we see and read about the devastation here and around the world; when we think about our unrealized goals; how many things are still on our to-do list. Sometimes it's hard to have hope when we don't have enough in the bank, or enough energy at the end of the day. It's very tempting to become cynical and skeptical. That skepticism is in our DNA – we've suffered a lot throughout our history - but Jews have also always relied heavily on hope.

Do you remember why the Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years? The distance between Egypt and Israel isn't so great as to warrant such a schlep. Our ancestors were forced to wait 40 years to enter the Promised Land because when Moses sent 12 scouts, one from each tribe, to sneak into Israel and report back, they offer a grim picture of this supposed land of milk and honey. "It is a place inhabited by giants," 10 of them say, "so big and scary that we must have looked like grasshoppers compared to them." This causes the entire Israelite community to freak out, crying out to Moses that they should just go back to Egypt and forget the whole journey – that it would be better to have died in Egypt as slaves than to have made their way towards the Promised Land.

How many times do we feel like the journey to our own personal lands of milk and honey is just too overwhelming; that the obstacles are too huge; that we are nothing but tiny, and weak, and inadequate? We can't get that job or promotion; our relationship with our partner is too damaged to ever be repaired; our child is too complicated for us to help; our finances are so all-over-the-place there's no way we can get back in the "black."

Only two of those 12 scouts, Caleb and Joshua, offer a hopeful account of the new land promised to us by God. "Have no fear," they say, "it is a good land and God will protect us." Unfortunately, the majority of Israelites do not share Caleb and Joshua's hope and as a result, God demands that an entire generation wander in the desert before they can enter – a mentality of hopelessness and smallness has no place in our Promised Land. And so we wander until hopelessness becomes hope; until hopelessness is transformed into optimism for what the future can hold.

In ten days, on Yom Kippur, we are supposed to imagine our own deaths so that we can do the important work to change our lives right now, not next year or when it's convenient. We are

to imagine ourselves standing before the gates of heaven, prepared to answer questions about whether or not we have led a meaningful life.

1. “Did you set aside time for learning Torah?”
2. “Did you devote yourself to family?”
3. “Were you honest in business?”
4. “Do you have hope?”

How will you answer these questions in the coming year? After all, it’s the only to-do list that matters.

Shana tova.