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Monmouth Reform Temple
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A friend shared this story with me ... “Every Sunday morning I take a light jog around a park near my home. There’s a lake located in one corner of the park. Each time I jog by this lake, I see the same elderly woman sitting at the water’s edge with a small metal cage sitting beside her.

This past Sunday my curiosity got the best of me, so I stopped jogging and walked over to her. As I got closer, I realized that the metal cage was in fact a small trap. There were three turtles, unharmed, slowly walking around the base of the trap. She had a fourth turtle in her lap that she was carefully scrubbing with a spongy brush.

“Hello,” I said. “I see you here every Sunday morning. If you don’t mind my nosiness, I’d love to know what you’re doing with these turtles.”

She smiled. “I’m cleaning off their shells,” she replied. “Anything on a turtle’s shell, like algae or scum, reduces the turtle’s ability to absorb heat and impedes its ability to swim. It can also corrode and weaken the shell over time.”

“Wow! That’s really nice of you!” I exclaimed.

She went on: “I spend a couple of hours each Sunday morning, relaxing by this lake and helping these little guys out. It’s my own strange way of making a difference.”

“But don’t most freshwater turtles live their whole lives with algae and scum hanging from their shells?” I asked.

“Yep, sadly, they do,” she replied.

I scratched my head. “Well then, don’t you think your time could be better spent? I mean, I think your efforts are kind and all, but there are fresh water turtles living in lakes all around the world. And 99% of these turtles don’t have kind people like you to help them clean off their shells. So, no offense... but how exactly are your localized efforts here truly making a difference?”

The woman giggled aloud. She then looked down at the turtle in her lap, scrubbed off the last piece of algae from its shell, and said, “Sweetie, if this little guy could talk, he’d tell you I just made all the difference in the world.””

How many of you feel empowered to heal the world? Every morning we wake up and say the words “Modeh ani lefanekha. – I give thanks to you God.” For what are we thankful? The gospel according to Marc – this marc ... we are thankful for opportunity. Every day we awake, we have a chance to change the world that is, into the one of peace for which we pray.

I have been the dean of Faculty at the URJ Goldman Union Camp for the past few years before moving here. I cannot speak yet to mornings at Camp Harlem, but my favorite time at camp is first thing in the morning. At GUCI, the wakeup call comes through the loudspeakers, and the campers ... often still in some variation of pajamas, gather at the center of camp for a wakeup song session with added commentary on the day’s activities. The same three songs happen pretty much every morning, as camper eyes begin to open. They get there standing, but not necessarily awake. And then ... they begin singing a series of verses of “Na na na na na...” It is the beginning of Danny Nichols’ musical version of the prayer to heal the world. The most exhausted of youth begins jumping around ... shouting at the top of their lungs, Barukh Atah Adonai, Elohaenu Melekh Ha-olam shenatan lanu hizdamut l’takaen et haolam – Praised is God, ruler of eternity who has given us the opportunity to mend the world.” Every day begins just that way, and then through study, art, sports, incredible silliness, programs, and bonding time, the day’s activities empower campers to do just that ... heal the world. I cannot help but see this ritual ... albeit with a little different setting and volume ... (PAUSE FOR EFFECT) I cannot help but see this as a great paradigm for each of us ... each day. SO, every morning ... we will meet at the flag pole outside ... (PAUSE)

No, Seriously, to that end, I wanted to share a short list of things that we can do every day to stay focused on doing this incredible work. For each such element on the list, the only requirement is intentional dedication to see each day as an opportunity for blessing. I asked our religious school students, “What’s a blessing?” We decided that it was in part how we spoke with each other, in part what we shared with each other, and in larger part, how we demonstrated our appreciation for each other.

1. The average human life is relatively short.

Psalm 90 reminds us that a thousand years are but a watch in God's night and the span of our life but the blink of God's eye. The moment we come into being, our days are numbered. I do not know how it works ... and I do not believe that the length of our days is pre-measured, but we know that our days are finite. Somehow, we have learned to spend more energy focusing on the shock of loss than we do on the appreciation of being. Our days with each other are limited. Whenever they are cut off, they are cut off too soon. When we spend more energy mourning our loss than we do celebrating life, we diminish the life of the people we miss. We are not guaranteed one day with each other ... each is a gift. Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside you while you're still alive, when you spend more time focusing on loss than you do on life.

Each one of us is responsible for what we do with our days. We are told that each of us must write our own Torah during our life. I am not a literalist. There are enough Torah scrolls in the world ... we need more Torah people ... people who live with an intentional focus on blessing. No one can write your Torah for you, and the life and length of your days will bear your own signature ... whatever other influences there are on life. As people walk through our lives ... short term or for the long haul, their imprint stays with us ... we are forever impacted and changed by their influence, but it is our job to live and be and celebrate each moment of being. So, teach us O God, to number our days, that we might fill them with blessing and gain hearts of wisdom.

2. Follow your passions even when ... or especially when it takes lots of courage to do so.

The Talmud teaches us that when we stand before the throne of judgment, we will have to atone for the transgressions for which we have not atoned. We will also be held accountable for the dreams we left unfulfilled, the dreams we failed to pursue, and for the opportunities for blessing that we wasted. We are all people of faith in something ... we need to have enough faith in ourselves that we can take the leap of faith that it takes to make dreams real. And if life only teaches you one thing, let it be that taking a passionate leap is always worth it. I am not suggesting that we should not plan, or that we should avoid the real world. I am not suggesting that every leap will breed immediate success. Often the most abysmal failures lead to the most amazing epiphanic successes. The difference between failure and success is the courage to try just one more

time. Thomas Alva Edison said, "I have not failed, I have just found 10,000 ways that won't work." I am suggesting that often we are too afraid to do what we know in our souls we need to do. We spend lots of time doing things, performing daily tasks, but at some point, we have to take a step backwards to see if being busy is the same as being productive. What are we accomplishing? Good job performance, healthy pay checks, employment security are all very important, but are they enough to allow you the opportunity to celebrate life? I loved the practice of law. I hated the business of the practice of law ... and the fact that I was practicing in the middle of an ugly Little Rock, Arkansas atmosphere that we now call "Whitewater," did not help. I was successful. I was building my own law firm. The day that my rabbi showed up to suggest a career change, I could not jump fast enough. It was scary ... and next to getting married and having children, it was the most amazing leap of faith, it opened my eyes to the many blessings available to me ... simply because I made that intentional choice to live. Your life will not have value because you keep your eye on someone else's idea of life's prize. Your life will not have value because you want to do something different. Make your actions speak louder than your words and more passionate than your dreams. There is a huge difference between thinking about ... even talking about pursuing your dreams and actually working to pursue them. It is said that God never gives us a dream, without also giving us the power to make it real. Heaven and earth touch when we contribute the courage and commitment to make wise us of the power.

3. You don't have to wait for an apology to forgive. The Wisdom of Ben Sirakh taught, "Forgive your neighbors [their] transgressions, and then when you pray, your sins will be forgiven."

Life gets much easier when you learn to accept all the apologies you never got, and learn to respond with respect and love to even those who have wronged you. This holiday season is all about letting go of what has been. Here is the truth. If someone intended to wrong you, they are not coming back to apologize. If they did not know that they hurt you, they are not coming back to apologize. In either case, if in a "still hurt" state you remind them that they did not apologize, you run a huge risk of opening the door for the next painful episode, diminishing your spirit even more. How many of you have family and former friends with whom you have had a falling

out? How many many don't even remember why? How many who do remember, feel a physical response every time in their presence or when they come up in a conversation? The key to forgiveness is letting go. In truth, we have the opportunity to be thankful for every experience – positive or negative. Where we hold on to pain, we only hurt ourselves. We become the purveyors of our own pain. Ultimately, it is ours to let go of the past, to learn from the pain, grow from the experience, and to not wait on the apology. If we can be healthy, it will allow us to effectively and meaningfully approach one who wronged us to explain. The rest is up to him. On the other hand ... don't wait to apologize. Carrying baggage for things we have done holds us back for lifetimes, and oddly, the apology moves mountains we did not even know existed.

In 4th grade, Kathy Van Comprenolle gave me a valentine card. Now, she probably gave one to each member of our class, but, I was the classic nerd – briefcase, plastic framed glasses, pocket protector for pens and all. I was amazed and on cloud 9, until Mark McGhie – the class bully- threatened to beat me up ... again, if I didn't tear up the card in her face. In fear, I did just that. Kathy never spoke to me through our High school graduation. She was smart, sweet, athletic, and pretty and I always regretted that day ... Mark beat me up many times since. Facebook is a wonderful tool. In planning our 30 year HS reunion, I found Kathy's contact info. I wrote and apologized for a burden I had been carrying for 40 years. She didn't remember the incident, told me that she always remembered me being a nice smart guy, and apologized for being aloof ... she lived through her own hell at home and withdrew from everyone. And, btw, Mark McGhie is a great guy now. I wrote Mark got back a life story of having been abused at home ...taking it out on people like me at school. We are close friends now. I had to apologize to all three of us for holding on to the baggage for so many years.

***** The truth is that we all have garbage to take out. We have our own t'shuvah to do: we owe it to others to give them the same grace we want. We have the same obligation to heal relationships that we demand of others. The world heals when we commit to walk again, side by side, with those whose paths we wrongly avoided.

4. If you spoke about others, the way you speak about yourself, would you want to be your own friend? In Leviticus, we read, “Love your neighbor as yourself; I am Adonai” There is a Chasidic interpretation of the last words of this verse: “I am Adonai.” – “You think that I am far away from you, but in your love for your neighbor you will find Me; not in his love for you but in your love for him.” He whose love transcends his angst brings God and the world together. Further, the Talmud relates the teaching of Yokhanan Ben Zakkai: acts of loving kindness supersede ritual as the preferred way of returning to God.

We are ... me included ... self deprecating. We second guess ourselves. We often worry about being inferior to a task. A firther warning attached to the text reminds us that if we do not like ourselves, then treating our neighbor as we love ourselves would be really non-productive.

It's not someone else's job to love you and believe you have value, and ... by extension, if you don't believe it, why would anyone else? There is a tradition of which Jews in America suffer. “Don't make waves!” We hid our Judaism in fear. Then we got upset because we were discounted and ignored. Across this country, we get upset when public prayers are Christian prayers. We get upset when organizations schedule programs on Jewish holidays. If our tradition is not important enough for us to live, then why would it be important for someone else to protect?

You really have to love yourself to get anything done in this world. So make sure you don't start seeing yourself through the eyes of those who don't value you. Know your worth, even if they don't. They will, or you need to look elsewhere.

Today, let someone love you just the way you are – as flawed as you might be, as unattractive as you sometimes feel, and as incomplete as you think you are. You are blessed. God did not make a mistake with anyone of us. Yes, let someone love you despite all of this, and let that someone be YOU. And it really does not matter what you have, what matters is who you are. Your value is rooted in the love you bring, not the stuff you have. Don't get me wrong, we want to have nice things; we want nice homes; we want the ability to do things that we enjoy. I am not knocking any of that, I am, though, saying that I know lots of wealthy people who are emotionally impoverished and lots of poor people who sing the praises of living.

If this day is about anything important, it is not going to be found in the prayer book. It will temporarily be felt in the music, if you make it through this sermon ... that would be nice, too, but the value of this day is in the intentionality that you bring to reconciling ourselves with love, with peace, with healing, and with forging a better and more whole tomorrow. Life is short and we must live it intentionally and passionately. If we let people's brokenness hold us back, we demean ourselves and hold ourselves hostage in their brokenness. Most importantly, emerge from this holiday loving yourself, respecting that the gifts you have to offer are of amazing value and that you deserve the same attention and blessings that every other of child of God deserves.

Folks, we are already inscribed this year ... we made it: it began 10 days ago ... now ... it's time to celebrate the blessing of being. Remember the woman at the lake; we have the opportunity, every day, to heal the world. Ani v'atah, neshaneh et ha-olam. You and I, can clean each turtle, heal each heart, hold each person we meet in need, and learn to love that we share in this work of the soul. So, you know the response ... how are you today? Blessed every day!