

Little more than an hour ago, most of us were just pushing back our chairs to get up from a very satisfying pre-holiday meal. Knowing that it was our last meal for twenty five hours, we ate plenty and we ate well. Calories definitely don't count on Erev Yom Kippur. Many of us are still feeling pretty full from our holiday meals; the kind of full that makes us feel like we don't really want to get up from the holiday table. I know that I am still feeling that way right now. Almost all of us, I am sure are still feeling very satisfied. And that is as it should be. In the Talmud, the rabbis teach that eating and drinking on the day before Yom Kippur is as important as fasting on Yom Kippur.

Twenty four hours from now, of course, we will all be feeling very differently. As we are finishing up our *Ne'ielah* service tomorrow night, most of us will probably be feeling very unsatisfied. Our stomachs will be empty and rumbling. We will have spent the entire day without eating or drinking. No doubt, most of us will be anxious to hear the final shofar blast so we can rush out and fill the void.

By design, our experience of Yom Kippur feels very different than our experience of the day before. But our experience of the day before Yom Kippur probably does not feel all that different from our experience of the rest of the days of the year. Of course, we don't gather together with our families every day for a big festive meal. But we are accustomed to feeling satisfied, even full, most of the time. We have plenty of food in our houses. Our biggest challenge is not hunger, but self-control. And in a broader sense, we are far more likely to have the experience of satisfaction—of having enough or even too much—than to have the experience of a void we cannot fill. Not only do we have plenty to eat, but we also have nice homes to live in and nice cars to drive. We are able to take vacations, some of us even cruises and trips abroad. We wear well-made clothes. Our homes are filled with comfortable furniture and all kinds of electronics—which also fill our pockets or purses. When it comes right down to it, most of us live pretty nicely. We have everything we need, and many of the things we want, too. Not only that, we live in a very nice, safe community with good schools and friendly neighbors. Many of us have close family members and long-time friends who live nearby. Our children, and for some of us, our grandchildren and even great grandchildren, are a source of pride and joy every day.

Of course, most of us have our troubles too. Our lives are far from perfect; we also know pain and heartache. But, on the whole we have it pretty good. And we probably feel pretty good about what we have. I know that I sometimes stop and think to myself “I wish this time in my life could last

forever. I am pretty healthy, I love my work, I have a beautiful loving family and lots of great friends. I live in a nice neighborhood and have everything that I really need. Whatever troubles and challenges I might deal with, I feel very lucky, and very blessed, to be where I am today.” I am pretty sure that I am not the only one in the room tonight who feels this way. In our heart of hearts, most of us would have to admit that, whatever our day to day frustrations, life is pretty darn good.

Of course, satisfaction brings its own challenges. A few years ago, I spoke to you about the challenge of not taking all the good things we have for granted. It is easy to forget that not everyone lives the way we do. Nearly fifteen percent of Americans face food insecurity each day. Even in wealthy Nassau county, the rate has climbed to over six percent. One percent of our population, as many as three million people in our country, are homeless. We do not see much hunger or homelessness here in Plainview. But we do not have to go far to see people who live very differently than we do. We have worked hard to get where we are in life. We have earned our comfortable lifestyle. But we have also been blessed with opportunities that others do not have: strong family support, good schools and safe neighborhoods. And we have been fortunate to have been born in a time and a place where we can take advantage of these opportunities without interference from war, disease or pogroms.

For most of the year, Judaism tries to push us out of our complacency. Every day, our rituals and prayers challenge us not to take God's blessings for granted; but to express our appreciation and gratitude for the good things we have in life. As I reminded you a few years ago, the purpose of all the routine blessings we say every day—blessings before eating, blessings after eating, blessings when we wake up in the morning, when we use the bathroom, when experience a joyous event or see a wonder of nature—is to teach us to express our appreciation for the common everyday miracles we might otherwise take for granted. Many of our daily prayers serve the same purpose as well. It is easy to become self-satisfied when things are going well. It is easy to take all the credit for the good things in our lives. But Judaism challenges us to maintain a healthier perspective. We are not entitled, we are blessed. We are not deserving, we are grateful. Our resources belong not to us alone, but to God, who wants us to share with those who don't have.

On Yom Kippur, though, Judaism confronts each of us with a different kind of challenge. Instead of asking us to appreciate more fully what we have, Judaism asks us to think about what we still lack.

Our rituals focus our attention on what is missing in our lives—not so much the material things, but the intangibles, the empty places in our hearts and souls. Fasting on Yom Kippur awakens us to the emptiness that all of us feel inside. This emptiness, though, comes not from lack of food, but lack of fulfillment. If we dig deep down deep enough, we will all find a void inside our spirits that cries out to be filled; a yawning chasm between who we are and who we know we can be. Repeatedly confessing our sins heightens our awareness of all the ways we still fall short, all the mistakes we still make, all the opportunities we still miss for good, for love and for healthy relationships. By abstaining from physical pleasures on Yom Kippur, not just food and drink, but bathing, sexual relations and comfortable shoes, we are challenged to ask ourselves: “once we take away all the material pleasures we enjoy, how satisfied are we really with the people we are and the lives we have made for ourselves?”

For people like us, people who for the most part live comfortable and happy lives, this last question is an important one; one we should be asking ourselves not just on Yom Kippur, but throughout the year. It is so easy for us to get stuck, to stop growing and become complacent once we reach the point in our lives where we are established and things are going well. There is a story told about the great 18th century Chasidic master Reb Zussya, who was sitting and studying the Talmud. Reb Zussya's students once looked over his shoulders and saw him studying a certain page of the Gemara. The next day they saw their Rabbi was studying the identical page. The following week they saw him on the same page still! It bothered them and they finally questioned him. "How come you are still on the same page?!" To which Reb Zussya responded, "It feels so good here, why should I go elsewhere?"

In the story, Reb Zussya is not truly satisfied. Rather he gets stuck in the familiar and the comfortable. He settles for the limited rewards of the known rather than pursuing the greater rewards that may come from moving forward into the unknown. There are areas of our lives in which each of us should be asking the question, “why am I still on the same page?” Am I truly satisfied, or am I just stuck? Am I satisfied with engaging in the same behaviors that annoy, inconvenience and hurt others over and over again? Am I satisfied with responding to the complaints others voice by telling them 'well, that's just the way I am?' Or am I stuck in pattern of bad behavior that I haven't tried hard enough to break? Am I satisfied with the kind of spouse, parent or grandparent that I am; the level I

engage emotionally and physically with those I love? Or am I holding back; settling for a level of engagement that doesn't push me out of my comfort zone; even if it means compromising the quality of my relationships? Am I satisfied with the work that I do, the way I care for myself, the level that I give of myself to others and to the community? Or am I simply stuck in doing what is easy and comfortable, even though I know I can do more and do better? Am I satisfied with my spiritual life? Or am I settling for a remoteness from God and a disconnect from my religion because I am not willing to invest the time or the emotional energy to reconnect? In what areas of my life am I really where I want to be? And in what areas of my lives have I allowed myself to grow comfortable instead pushing ourselves to move forward?"

When it comes to material things, Judaism teaches us that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be comfortable. Each year, we ask God during the High Holidays to inscribe us not just in the book of life, but also for goodness, peace and prosperity. But when it comes to matters of the spirit, Judaism challenges us to aim higher. There is another famous story about Reb Zusya, one that I am sure many of you have heard me tell. The students of Reb Zusya, hearing that their teacher was about to die, came to pay him one last visit. But entering the room, they were surprised to see him trembling with fear. "Why are you afraid?" they asked. "In your life, have you not been as righteous as Moses himself?" "When I stand before the throne of judgment," Zusya answered, "I will not be asked, 'Reb Zusya, why were you not like Moses?' I will be asked, 'Reb Zusya, why were you not like Zusya?'"

In this poignant story, Reb Zusya teaches that God does not want us to be satisfied with simply being good enough people. God does not want us to be satisfied even if we approach the level of Moses. Rather God does not want us not to be satisfied until we have become the person we have the potential to be; the best version of ourselves. To embrace God's purpose for us, we must always view ourselves as a work in progress. We must always be learning, growing, challenging ourselves. We must resist the temptation to become too comfortable, too self-satisfied. We must remain hungry for the fulfillment that comes only by moving beyond our comfort zones.

This week, I attended "Meet the Teachers" night at Yoni's new school, Solomon Schechter of Nassau County. Yoni's second grade secular studies teacher presented to us her overarching goals for the students this year. Most of the goals were pretty standard: developing greater independence, a love of reading and an appreciation of each student as an individual. But one goal really grabbed my

attention. Yoni's teacher told us she wanted her students to become “risk takers”; to not be afraid to ask questions, not be afraid to answer questions they are not sure of, not be afraid to try new things.

This message resonated with me because most of the good things that have happened to me over the last ten years have been the result of risk taking. It felt very risky for me to get married a second time after a first, failed, marriage. It felt very risky for me to become a father again at age 45. It felt risky for me to go to Toastmasters to work on my public speaking skills after a fifteen years in the rabbinate. In any of these cases, it would have been easier for me to hunker down and stay in my comfort zone. Making these decisions was scary at the time. In each case, it hasn't always been a smooth ride. There have been challenges as well as rewards. But I wouldn't be the person or the rabbi I am today if I hadn't put myself out there; hadn't been willing to grow and change.

The message of Yom Kippur is that we, too, should become risk takers. We should not be afraid to challenge ourselves, not be afraid to try to change familiar behaviors, not be afraid to push ourselves beyond our self-imposed emotional and spiritual limits. The path of a risk taker is not always an easy one. Every risk we take does not always pay off. But the risks that do pay off can change our lives for the better; can make move us closer to becoming the people we know we can be.

We live in a culture that encourages us to acquire more and more material goods by making us feel that we are empty and lacking without them. Yet, as the rabbis observed long ago, “No one dies having fulfilled even half his desires. Whoever possesses one hundred, desires two hundred; whoever possesses two hundred, desires four hundred.” We need to resist the pressure all around us to seek out greater satisfaction by buying more things. New things are nice. But unless we appreciate what we have, show gratitude to God for all our blessings, and share our bounty with others, we will simply be holding off the persistent sense of emptiness we feel until the next big thing comes along. When it comes to satisfaction, our culture has got things backwards—and Judaism has it right. The way to fill the void in our lives is not to acquire more possessions, but to push ourselves to keep turning the page, to be that person we are really capable of being. When it comes to ourselves, our character, our relationships, our actions, we cannot afford to get too comfortable. We need to resist the temptation to settle, to allow ourselves to get stuck in being simply the people we are today. Instead, we need to remember that the people who derive the most satisfaction from life are people like Zusya, who never stop trying to be everything they can be.

May this Yom Kippur bring us all a *Chatimah Tovah*; let us all be sealed for a good, happy and healthy New Year—a year of gratitude, a year of growth, a year in which we we all take some risks and are able to reap the rewards of a becoming an even better version of ourselves.