

“If I Am Only For Myself, What Am I?”

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Yom Kippur Afternoon Reflection, 5773

Community Synagogue of Rye

If virtue occupies a spectrum spanning from Haman to Hillel, I hope my evaluation in the book of life puts me a little north of the midway point. Like most of us, I struggle with finding the right balance between caring for myself and those I hold dear, enjoying the good life and giving back to society.

I've been evolving as a conscious reform jew for more than four decades starting as a young religious school student at Temple Beth-El of Great Neck which I attended through confirmation. I spent six months in Israel as a high school junior on a NFTY exchange program. I even was a drama counselor at a NFTY camp back in the day. We've been active members of this synagogue for 15 years or so.

My once respectable baritone voice seems to have deteriorated with age, but I still love to sing in shul (my wife Andi complains that I sing too loudly). The song that has had the greatest impact on me is one I learned as 7 year old in Mrs. Cook's music class: Al Shelosha D'Varim. It tells us the world stands on three things --Torah (law), Avodah (service to God) and - a real tongue twister -- g'milut chasadim (acts of loving kindness, which incorporates everything from interpersonal relationships to the concept of tzedakah, the just practice of supporting the needy and other worthy causes.)

If those are the three legs of the Judaism stool, I guess I'm sort of teetering on one leg, that of g'milut chasadim. Growing up, my religious education and my parents both impressed on me that a good person is one who gives back to society. It's a concept that is never far from my mind.

In fact, it has caused me some significant psychic pain at times. In my late-thirties, I found myself on a therapist's couch struggling with serious unhappiness. The outside world saw a former journalist with a lovely wife and children who'd gone back to school for an MBA and was making his way up the ladder at a respectable marketing agency in Fairfield County. What I saw was a guy spending long, long days at the office for the noble purpose of selling more apple sauce. How could I possibly have been put on this earth to dedicate my waking hours to moving cases of mashed up fruit? How was that adding value to society? I'm not putting down what anyone else does for a living. This was MY hang up. I was embarrassed and depressed and lived under a cloud for quite some time as my wife well remembers.

From the marketing agency I moved on to 9 months as CMO of an ill-fated dot.com. When that folded, I set up shop in a windowless cinderblock basement home office trying to figure out what to do next. I was fortunate to be able to attract a healthy stream of consulting clients to keep us going financially and even luckier that several of them asked me to help them with something called cause marketing, the concept of business embracing social causes as a way of doing well by doing good. Some well known programs included General Mills' Boxtops for Education, Avon's Breast Cancer Crusade and TOMS donation of shoes to children in need.

After immersing myself in the topic, I had one of those rare Eureka moments that I hope all of you have had or will experience in your lifetimes. Cause Marketing was a growing field and nobody had created a company designed to share best practices. With my grab bag of skills from journalism, business school, publishing and marketing, and a dose of Chutzpah, I decided to be the guy who created a community for the far flung group of people doing this work. If I managed it well, it could support my family and if I did a good job, more and better programs would emerge that would provide more resources for good works to be done. And if that happened - and I continued to practice tzedakah in my personal life, I might sleep a bit more soundly.

Fast forward a dozen years. Now I'm 52 and I don't sleep so well for other reasons, but my company, the Cause Marketing Forum, has flourished as businesses, even in these challenging times, recognize that consumers prefer to do business with firms that give back. Last May a record number of people attended our 10th annual conference at which we launched a book I co-authored called "Good Works! Corporate and Marketing Initiatives that Build a Better World and the Bottom Line."

Although running a conference can be stressful -- will the panelists arrive on time?, will the AV work?, will the food taste good? - conference day is generally a highpoint of my year. I get chills hearing inspiring speakers share incredible stories of how they've been able to create programs that do well by doing good. How the support of Pampers has helped UNICEF vaccinate millions of women in the developing world and saved thousands of children from deadly tetanus in the process. How Whirlpool contributes a range and refrigerator to each home built by Habitat for Humanity. How Nike and the LiveStrong foundation turned a yellow rubber wrist band into a movement that raised millions to help people fighting cancer. After each conference, I walk away humbled by the knowledge of just how hard people around the country are working-trying their darndest to find cures, fix problems, and raise awareness for some troubling and important health issues and world challenges. I feel so blessed and grateful that our company plays a small part in helping them achieve their goals.

So? "So what?" I thought as I sat at my computer and realized it was time to conclude this short narrative. What might others be able to learn from this slice of my life experience?

For many there is no important lesson to be learned because they are at peace with the relationship between their work and their Jewish values.

To those who are bothered by a gap between their work life and their values, my experience tells us that this is a question worth exploring. And it offers hope that it is possible to narrow that breach. For a very few people that could mean starting a business. For some it may mean switching companies or changing the type of work they do within their company. For others there are other options such as meaningful pro-bono work, volunteering through your workplace or rallying colleagues to donate their time or resources.

I have no simple answers. I'm not a life coach. I have no training in helping people plan their careers. If this issue resonates with you and you'd like a sympathetic ear and perhaps some tidbits of advice, it would be my pleasure to take any of you out for a cup of coffee and a chat between now and this time next year.

After all "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?"

Amen.