

We have become a society of list makers. There are list of and for everything. Have you seen the list of “Ways to Survive Even the Dullest of Sermons”? In case you get bored, let me share it with you!

1. See if a yawn really is contagious.
2. Listen for a word beginning with 'A' then 'B' and so on through the alphabet. You may get stuck on 'Q' unless the sermon is preaching against homosexuality.
3. Sit in the back row and roll a handful of marbles under the pews ahead of you. After the service, credit yourself with 10 points for every marble that made it to the front.
4. Using the bulletin for raw material, design, test and modify a collection of paper airplanes.
5. Start from the back and try to crawl all the way to the front, under the pews, without being noticed.
6. Raise your hand and ask for permission to go to the lavatory.
7. Whip out a hankie and blow your nose. Vary the pressure exerted on your nostrils and trumpet out a rendition of your favorite prayer.
8. Pretend to be 4 years old.
9. Try to raise one eyebrow.
10. Crack your knuckles.
11. Think about your chin for an entire minute.
12. Twiddle your thumbs.
13. Twiddle your neighbor's thumbs.
14. Wiggle your ears so that the people behind you will notice.
15. Practice smiling insincerely.

I figured I'd give you something practical to start with! Some of my favorite lists come from folks on late night TV like Jay Leno and David Letterman. But in truth, lists are pervasive in today's society. Some people have small scraps of paper in their shirt pockets for their lists, some people have pieces of paper all over the place with lists on them, some people have nice fancy organizers with lists in them and yet others have electronic lists in the PDAs. We've got our short-term lists, things to get done today or at least by the end of the week; our long-term lists, things to do this year; and now there are even Life Lists, things to accomplish before our ultimate demise.

I come from a long line of list makers; in my house we had our grocery list, the to-do list, lists of books to read and movies to rent. I have always been a list maker. I love creating lists and then the sense of accomplishment that comes as you cross off something once it is done. When I started using a Palm Pilot and my lists were electronic, they became much more sophisticated. Items in my lists can be given a priority ranking from 1-5, they can be assigned a due date, they can be categorized and I can even give them reminder alarms.

I suspect that if I were to poll you right now, there would be quite a number of list makers in the congregation. For many of us it may be a necessity, but more than that for many it has become an obsession. Go on line and google "lists" you'll get literally get millions of hits. It is overwhelming. If you are a sports fan then you have a whole world of facts, statistics and lists. We are coming to the end of the baseball season, so we have our RBI list, our hits, our homerun lists, ERA lists, saves, strikes & walks. You name it there is a list for it. College football is underway, so you have the myriad of polls each listing their number one team in the country. For the music lovers in our midst, every week Billboard Music has it list of top selling songs. And the list of lists can go on and on.

How many of you saw the article in a recent Sunday Times entitled, "Ten Things to Do Before This Article is Finished"? It was done in a humorous fashion, but it highlighted the growing phenomenon of lists, especially Life Lists. For those of you who have not yet encountered Life Lists, they are lists of the things you plan to accomplish before you die. Always wanted to learn to play the piano? Put it on your list. Haven't yet been to Israel? Put it on your list. Need ideas - there is the list of "1000 Places to See Before You Die", there is the list of "1001 Book You Must Read Before You Die". According to the website SuperViva.com, one of many websites devoted entirely to creating Life Lists, the most popular are: Buy a house, Pay off my debts, Get married, Go to Italy, Ride in a hot air balloon, Exercise 3-5 times per week, Write a book, Go to Hawaii, Get my passport & Swim with dolphins.

Last spring when I attended the Rabbinical Assembly Convention, I went to a session offered by Dr. Ron Wolfson a professor at the American Jewish University in LA. He was talking about a different kind of list - he asked us four questions - they were good questions, so now I'm going to ask you these four questions:

1. What is the meaning of your life?
2. Where is your community?
3. When can I feel God's presence?
4. What is my purpose?

He told us about a pastor in Southern California named Rick Warren, who asked these questions and then wrote a book entitled "The Purpose Driven Life" that was a best seller. He then put his ideas into practice and now leads the largest congregation in the country with 82,000 members. Wolfson sought to give a Jewish answer to these questions and he has written an impressive little book entitled, "God's To-Do List". His answer is that we are on earth to be God's partners, to do the tasks that God has for us. And he has come up with a to-do list from God that is meant to help us begin the process of determining what God wants of us and creating our own to-do list from the Devine.

I read the book this summer and highly recommend it to you especially at this time of the year. You have heard me many times refer to the fact that on Rosh Hashanah we ought to engage in *cheshbon hanefesh*, soul searching. Now is the time to ask serious questions about how we are doing at living our lives, to think about what needs changing and what we hope to accomplish in the year to come. Without goals, direction, a blueprint it is hard to know if we are on the right path because we are just meandering directionless through life. Our life is intended to have a purpose, a purpose from God. If you can discover your own personal God's to-do list, then you can begin to see your own purpose.

The Yizkor service begins with the question, "*Mah Adam?* What is a human being? The answer is found in Genesis, "*Vayivrah Elohim et ha'adam b'zalmo... b'zelem Elohim oto...* God created humanity in the Divine image (1:27). What does it mean to be created in the image of God? It means that you have a spark of divinity within you. It means that you were created with a purpose and your purpose is to partner with God in perfecting the world, what rabbinically we call *tikun olam*. Now you might think that all this talk about God and purpose is a bunch of mumbo-jumbo and I'll concede you might be right, but there is also the possibility that I am correct. It's all in how you how conceive of God. There are actually many different legitimate conceptions of God, sometimes we get stuck thinking of God in one way, a way that does not work for us and so we throw out the baby with the bathwater, so to speak.

The Torah tells us what God wants of us, "*Kedoshim tihiyu ki kadosh Adonai Eloheychem; Be holy, for I, the Lord Your God, am holy.*" (Lev. 19:2) OK, we are supposed to be holy, but what does it mean to be holy? It means acting like God. So what does God do? Let's take a look at the Torah: "*Bereshit bara Eloheem* In the beginning God creates" (Genesis 1:1) The first thing God does is create, we who are created in God's image can also create - you can be

creative and it is holy. The possibilities are endless - you might like to paint or draw or sculpt; or perhaps, writing or composing or choreography is more your speed; maybe you prefer to cook or sew or do macramé; or you like photography or scrap booking. Rosh Hashanah is *Hayom Harat Olam*, the birthday of the world; on this day God created the earth, so think about how you can be creative. Make a list of creative things to do and you have begun your own God's To-Do List.

Dr. Wolfson identifies 10 God actions in the Torah, he then gives each of them 10 possible God's To-Do List ideas and room for you to add your own. He points out that after God creates in Genesis, God blesses. God blesses the animals, God blesses humanity and God blesses Shabbat. Just as God blesses, so too can you bless. You can give your blessing to something or someone; you are at work, your assistant has a new idea, you give it your blessing and they give it a try. On a more interpersonal note, there was a tradition of asking for the parents blessing before asking someone to marry that has fallen into disfavor in our age of independence. It is a shame in a way because it is not just about seeking permission, it is more profound than that, you want the approval of someone who is important to you, you want their blessing.

You can also count your blessings. You can think of all things in your life for which you are grateful and you can give thanks unto God for all the blessings that you have received. It is all too easy to take things for granted, it is important to realize that we have so much more than most of the world and we should count our blessing and be glad.

You can also ask for blessings. On Friday night it is tradition for parents to bless their children. However, if you closely examine *Birkat Kohanim*, the Priestly Benediction, you'll notice that what you are actually doing is asking God to bless your children with safety, with security and with peace. The power of blessings was brought home to me last winter when I was in Israel with members of the congregation on the UJA Jersey to Jerusalem Mission. It was Friday night and my son, Avi, who was studying at Ben Gurion University at the time had joined us for Shabbat. When we came to the point of *Birkat Kohamin* he got up and came over to me and commented that it had been a while since he'd last been blessed. I don't know if he gave it another thought, but I was floored - 20 years old, staying on his own in Israel, a very independent young man, coming over to be blessed; it certainly made a lasting impression on me as I asked God to watch over him and bless him.

After God blesses creation, God rests from the work of creation. Just as God rests, so too we should rest. Now I know this sounds simple and easy, but it's not. We are a society severely deprived of rest. We work too many hours and when not at work, we don't relax. We don't take enough vacation time and we don't get enough sleep at night. The doctors tell us that we should be getting 7-8 hours of sleep a night to be well rested. Most of us don't sleep more than

six hours and some only get 4 or 5 hours a night. Over time it leads to chronic fatigue; a state that many of you live with constantly. You can be your best if you are always tired.

Between cell phone, PDAs and our lists, we have something to do all the time. The challenge is set them all aside and give ourselves the time that we need and deserve to be our best. You need time to read, to relax, to take it easy and not feel like you are shirking your duty. You have a duty to yourself and to God to rest.

God by ceasing all creative activity has shown us what we need to do. Judaism has codified this with Shabbat. Shabbat is not a burden - it is a blessing. It is one day every week that we devote to rest, to the relaxation that we are not getting, to recharging our batteries for the busy week to come.

God calls. God calls to Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden asking *Ayekah?* Where are you? (Gen. 3:9) It is not an informational question, but rather a philosophical one. God had given them one restriction and they violated it. So now God is calling them on their behavior, asking what's up? What is the state of our relationship? As you sit here today, God is calling to you *ayekah* Where are you? What is the status of our relationship? What answer do you have for God?

God calls to Abraham, *Lech Lecha* Go Forth (Gen. 12:1) God makes demands on Abraham, major demands, pick up, pack up, go, leave everyone behind and start a new life. Abraham responds and becomes the first Jew. God makes demands on each one of us. When we respond, we become the next Jew following in the line of Abraham. Can you hear God's call? Will you respond? Will you rise to the challenge? Often when God calls in the Torah, the answer is *Hineyni* I am here. It is what Abraham says at the Binding of Isaac. It is what Moshe says at the Burning Bush. So what will be your answer to God's call? Will you say *hineyni*? I am here ready to do Your Will?

Just as God calls, so to we can call. We can call others to join us in God's service. We can literally make calls, calls on behalf of the synagogue, calls on behalf of causes that we believe in, calls to the people we love. Call someone on their birthday, it tells them that you care. Have you called your parents lately? *Kabed et Avicha v'et Emecha* Honor your Father and your Mother. (Ex. 20:12) One of the Ten Commandments tells us to honor our parents, not love them, not like them; but honor them. Regardless of how you feel about your parents, you have an obligation to honor them. One way of honoring them is to call and to visit them.

So what else does God do in the Torah? According to the rabbis, God comforts. Rabbis have a very insightful way of reading the text; we go beyond the simple words and seek to find what is the deeper meaning present. It is very similar

to what happens when we have important conversations. We hear the words that are spoken, but we also seek to understand the hidden meaning behind the words, the words not spoken. At the end of Parshat Lekh Lekha God commands Abraham to circumcise himself all the members of his household as a sign of their *Brit*, their Covenant. Abraham does so. Parshat Vayera begins with the Lord appearing to Abraham. So the rabbis deduce that God is visiting Abraham following his surgical ordeal to provide comfort to him during his recovery. God Comforts. So we should comfort.

There is so much pain in the world, so many people in need of comfort. Every time you provide that comfort, you are doing an action on God's To-Do List. Visiting the Sick, *Bikur Holim*, to use the Hebrew term, is such an important mitzvah. The rabbis taught from ancient times that every time you visit someone who is ill, you help reduce their discomfort. They understood instinctively what we can show today with studies. Visits make people feel better. That is one of our jobs, to make people feel better.

When you make a shiva call, there is nothing to be said; but your presence is a gift beyond compare. You provide comfort simply by being there, sharing the gift of yourself. Presence alleviates pain. It is not easy, by any means, to walk through the front door of a shiva house, it is awkward and uncomfortable; but it isn't about you. It is about the good you can do for someone who needs you. God Comforts, you can too.

When we befriend the stranger, when we invite the lonely to spend time with us; we provide comfort. The greatest gift we can give is ourselves. When Abraham is visiting with God and strangers show up at his door. He bids God farewell and he runs to welcome the guests. From this the rabbis teach us that it is more important to do God's Will, than to talk to God. Another example is the Talmudic passage that tells us if you are planting a tree and the Messiah arrives, first finish planting the tree, then go greet the Messiah. When we are doing items from God's To-Do List, there is no higher calling.

The sixth category of God's To-Do List is Caring. God cares for us, shows us kindness and when we care for others, we are doing God's work here on earth. We see it most clearly in a crisis, there were many examples of kindness and caring following 9/11 and the Oklahoma Bombing; there were examples after Katrina and the tsunami. But we need not wait for tragedy to strike in order to be kind. There is a passage in our Shabbat Siddur from the Talmud that tells us that *Gemilut Hesed*, Acts of Loving Kindness are superior to even Tzedakah. In that tzedakah can only be done with money, but *gemilut hesed* can be done with money or with your own two hands; tzedakah is for the poor, but *gemilut hesed* can be done for rich and poor alike; and finally, tzedakah is only for the living, but *gemilut hesed* can be done for the living and the dead. When you attend a funeral and participate in the burial, you perform an act of hesed.

The highest form of gemilut hesed is saving a life. Make sure that you are a registered organ donor, make sure that your family and friends know that it is your wish that if you, God forbid, are in a position to be an organ donor that you want to save a life, there is no higher calling. You will be doing God's Will. It says in the Talmud, that one who saves even a single life, it is as if he has saved an entire world. You can make a difference by caring - care and show that you care by that which you do.

Wolfson has a chapter devoted to *Tikun Olam*, Repairing the World. The Midrash tells us that when God finished creating the world, he told Adam that he was to care for the world because if he did not then there would be no one else to set it right again. That was God's charge to humanity. We have done a very poor job of it so far. We have managed to pollute the earth, to fill it with toxins. We have managed to deplete her of her natural resources, not just taking; but also destroying. We have managed to overpopulate the planet and so poorly distribute the food and other resources that many live in poverty and with hunger. Our job is to partner with God and attempt to repair the world before it is too late.

This summer on 07/07/07 many of us watched Live Earth, a worldwide concert to raise awareness and to get us to pledge to do better. Each of us can make a difference we just have to try. We have to be what Danny Siegel calls a Mitzvah Hero. Danny Siegel started a Jewish organization to help people called the Ziv Tzedakah Fund in its first year he raised and distributed just under a thousand dollars. This year it was almost \$2 million. Any of us can be a Mitzvah Hero. One of our Bar Mitzvah year teachers last year, Harvey Jaffe, is a Mitzvah Hero. Every year he collects tzedakah from his family, his friends, his students and he goes to Israel and distributes the money. We live in a world in great need of repair - if each of us does our part, we can help be a part of the solution.

God wrestling should be on your God's To-Do List. We come from a tradition of God wrestlers. When Abraham learned that God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness, he argues with God. When Jacob is about to return to the Land after being away for many years, he wrestles with an angel of the Lord and is transformed into Israel. Wrestling with God changes us for the better. When God is angry and threatens to destroy us in the desert, Moshe is there to argue on our behalf.

Everyone who experiences tragedy wrestles with God. Adam and Eve have two children die, they wrestle with God and they are blessed with a third child. Aaron has two children die, he wrestles with God and in the end he returns to Divine service and is the first Kohen Gadol, High Priest of the Bible. Job loses everything, wrestles with God; survives and is later blessed by God. We struggle with our belief in God, we struggle to understand a chaotic world, we

struggle to understand all the pain and suffering that is endured. We wrestle with God and if we are persistent and if we are lucky; we will be blessed.

God Gives. God gives us manna in the desert. God gives us the Land of Israel. God gives us the Torah. God gives us mitzvot to guide our lives. God gives us so much. We too can give. We can give of our bounty to those less fortunate. We can give of our skills and our talents to help others. We can give of our time, we can give love. When we give, we also receive.

Finally, God forgives. B'nai Yisrael, our ancestors, sin, transgress, loose faith and each and every time God forgives them. Takes them back. Renews the covenant. If God can forgive, then we can do no less. Forgiving is hard. When people hurt us upset us disappoint us; it is not easy to forgive them. But forgiveness ought to be on our personal God To-Do List. We have the *Aseret Yimey Teshuva*, the Ten Days of Return, to forgive those that have wronged us, to ask forgiveness from those we have wronged and perhaps most the most difficult of all is to forgive ourselves. In order for Yom Kippur to have its full effect we have to embrace forgiveness now.

Ron Wolfson tells us that we should do all of these Divine acts because God needs us. He asks doesn't God have angels to help out? And he answers; God depends on us to be like angels. When you do these acts you are an angel here on earth. You know the phrase, "Honey, be an angel and take out the garbage." When you do items from your God's To-Do List you will be an angel and you will touch the lives of others. He shared with us at the seminar that each us has already been touched by an angel. Let's take 30 seconds and do the exercise he had us do. I want you to turn to the person sitting next you and to look into their eyes, for our eyes are our windows to our soul. Then look under the nose. Go!

Did you see that little indentation under the nose? There is a 2000 year old midrash found in the Talmud by Rabbi Bunim.

While you are still in your mother's womb, God sends an angel to sit beside you
All the wisdom you'll ever need to know to be God's partner on earth. Then just
Before you are born, the angel taps you under the nose, forming the indentation.
And you forget everything the angel taught you! (Niddah 30b)

To this day, I remember when Avi was born and my in-laws came for the first time. Bill picked Avi up, touched the indentation on his lip and asked him if he still remembered any of the teachings. It was a very tender moment. The point of Rabbi Bunim's teaching is that each of us has a spark of divinity within us and our challenge in life is to relearn what was taught to us in the womb. When you look in a mirror and see the indentation in your lip, remember that you have been touched by an angel and that you have the potential to be an angel and touch the lives of others.

The subtitle of Ron Wolson's book is 103 Ways to Be an Angel and Do God's Work on Earth. That is our challenge at this time of reflection and return. I challenge you to read God's To-Do List, to create your own personal list and it is my hope that we can do these things together. A synagogue is a sacred community, together we can create a communal God's To-Do List and perform sacred acts and establish sacred relationship with one another and with the world; we can be angels.

You might think that angels are not very Jewish, but in truth, they are very much a part of our tradition. On Friday night when you gather around the Shabbat table and sing *Shalom Alechem*, you are welcoming angels into your home. We sing *Shalom alechem malakhey hashareit*, which means, Welcome angels of service..." *Boachem lishalom malekhy hashalom*, come in peace angels of peace; *Barchuni lishalom malekhey hashalom*, Bless me angels of peace; *Tzeytchem lishalom malkhey hashalom*, Go in peace angels of peace. You are to be malkhey hashareit, you are to be angels of service and when you do your God's To-Do List you will be welcomed in peace, you will be a blessing and you will go in peace.

How can you be a blessing? When God calls to Abraham, the promise is, "I will make your name great and you shall be a blessing. (Gen. 12:2); when we do God's work we can be a blessing. So Be a Blessing. I'd like to invite all of you to join with me in the holy task of being partners with God, but right now I'd like to invite you to join me in singing together Shalom Aleychem.

May God Bless You - Shana Tova!