

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

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D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5769

Ok! Time to start thinking about the divrei Torah for the High Holy Days! This year it isn't too bad. Rosh Hashanah starts almost in October. It doesn't get any better. The entire month of August to recover from four weeks in Israel and the whole of September to get organized for the new school year!

Last year it was crazy, the nightmare of any rabbi. Daniela, Ilan and Abby had just started school and the High Holy Days were knocking at the door ... Thank God, this year, it will be better.

I came home from Israel determined to accomplish many things. Among them, I will clean my desk and start thinking about the High Holy Days. I hate to rush at the last minute. I have so many things to share with my congregation.

It is mid-August. It is amazing how times flies. No, I didn't start thinking about the High Holy Days yet. I clean my desk and before you know it, it is piled with papers again. I reply to 14 emails and 17 more appear. It reminds me of one of the first arcade video games that appeared on the market: "Space Invaders." (Did you know that this year is the 30th anniversary of "Space Invaders"? I was 12 when I started playing it in Argentina, but I am digressing. This, by the way, is my problem: I digress a lot. Stay focused Manes, Stay focused! I say that to myself all the time, but it is so hard... My life is a digression...) Where was I? Yes, now I remember: I was telling you that my daily routine reminds me of the arcade game "Space Invaders."

"Space Invaders" is a two-dimensional, vertical shooter game in which the player controls a laser cannon by moving it horizontally across the bottom of the screen and firing at aliens. The aim is to defeat five rows of eleven aliens. The player defeats an alien by shooting it with the laser cannon—also earning points. As more aliens are defeated, the aliens' movements and the game's

music speed up. Defeating the aliens brings another wave that is more difficult; a cycle which can continue indefinitely. You can never win: you always will have aliens coming down (noise of laser cannon shooting). I can never clean my desk, nor answer all my emails.

Silvia calls: dinner is ready! I tell her: three more emails and I am there (noise of laser cannon shooting). I rush home but they already started dinner. The children couldn't wait. And they shouldn't. I eat fast (noise of laser cannon shooting), exchange a couple of words with Silvia, and rush to the evening minyan.

The weather is getting nicer. We are at the end of August and I still have one month to get my divrei Torah ready for the High Holy Days. One month is 30 days, 720 hours, 43,200 minutes. That should be more than enough time!

Daniela, Ilan and Abby started school and Silvia went back to work. I go back to my office, to my computer, to my emails. Today I should have time to sit down and start putting some thoughts together

Today didn't work out as planned. Something happened. I even can't point to what was it that took me away from my noble purpose. Something *always* happens; there's *always* a new digression.

One of my senior colleagues at the Hartman Institute told me, "Manes, something will always divert you from your goal, your journey, your priorities. It is up to you to change it! Your desk will never change, or will get even worse. You will always have new emails, new projects, new people who want to talk to you. It is up to you draw the boundaries, to prioritize and to give meaning to your life!"

An experienced presenter was at a conference speaking to a group of professionals. To clarify a point, he used an example the audience will never forget.

In front of the audience he said, "I want to test you ..." From under the table he took a glass jar with a large opening and put it on top of the table in front

of him. After that, he grabbed a dozen large stones and started introducing them inside the jar, one at a time.

When it was no longer possible to put more stones inside, he asked: "Is the jar full?" Everyone said, "Yes!"

So, the presenter asked, "Are you sure?" and from under the table he took a bucket full of small stones. He put some inside the jar and shook it, making the small stones occupy the space left between the large ones.

After this he asked again, "Is the jar full?" This time, one person answered, "Probably not!"

"Very well," the presenter replied. From under the table he took a bucket full of sand, and started pouring it into the jar. The sand occupied the space left between the big stones and the small stones. Once again, he asked the group, "Is the jar full?" Several people said, "No!"

Once again, the presenter said, "Well done!" And from under the table he took a jar full of water and poured it into the jar full of stones and sand. He only stopped when the water was spilling out of the jar.

When he finished, he looked at the audience and asked, "What is the lesson of this demonstration?"

One of the people in the audience raised his hand and said, "The lesson is that it does not matter how busy you are, because there is always space to fit in some more activities!"

"No!" answered the presenter. And he added:

"That is not the true lesson. The truth this demonstration reveals is that if you don't place the big stones in first, you cannot fit them in later.

Don't ever forget to put your big stones in first. Otherwise, you'll never find room for them later".

We all have "big stones" in our lives: our family, our education, a life project we want to finish or start, our health, a meaningful connection with God, with other human beings, with our inner self...

Life is like a post card. You start writing a postcard and then you realize that there is not enough space. You start writing smaller and smaller, trying to fit in as much as possible. You write on the borders, up and down, smaller and smaller, but there is only so much you can write... Eventually the space is gone and you wish you wrote your postcard differently.

We can't change the way we wrote our lives in the past, but we were blessed with the ability to change the way we write our future. Our jar of life is full of small, insignificant stones we wish were never there. We might not be able to take them out now, but we can certainly choose more carefully, which ones we place there in the future.

The following story speaks for itself, in giving us insight into the process of growing wisdom and performing *teshuvah*:

After a long, hard climb up the mountain, the spiritual seekers finally found themselves in front of the great teacher. Bowing deeply, they asked the question that had been burning inside them for so long: "How do we become wise?"

There was a long pause until the teacher emerged from meditation. Finally the reply came: "Good choices."

"But, teacher, how do we make good choices?"

"From experience," responded the wise one.

"And how do we get experience?"

"Bad choices," smiled the teacher.

Maybe after all my running in circles, my digressions in life, my lousy postcard-writing skills, my poor choice of stones, were not in vain. Maybe my

bad choices will enrich my experience and my enriched experience will lead me to better choices.

The High Holy Days provide us with a new opportunity. The books lay open in front of God, but also in front of us. It is true: we can't add years to our lives, but we can instill life in our years!

I know I said something similar the year before and the one before that and the one before that and the one before that... However, nowhere is it written that it needs to repeat itself forever. I tell myself: this year, Manes, should be different, must be different, and will be different!

There is one more point I would like to make: it is very difficult to change and therefore we may all need help. I promise to help you, but I need help from you as well!

At the end of the day, this is what Hillcrest Jewish Center should be about: not a provider of services; not a shul plus a school plus a pool; not this program plus this other program plus this other program; but a doorway to friendship and love, to service to God and to our fellow human beings, to a richer and more meaningful life!

"Leshanah tovah tikatavu! May all of us be inscribed for a good, sweet and meaningful new year!