

**If Not Now, When?**  
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As we embark on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, I invite you to take a moment to focus inwardly. . . [brief meditation]. Tonight, I invite you to ask yourself a question that only you can answer: If not now, when?

What arises when you ask this question? Is there a neglected relationship, a forgotten dream, a deep yearning to make a difference? If not now, when? Is there something about which you are procrastinating? Or is there something for which the time is not yet ripe? Hidden in that response could be the key to your life's mission.

A story is told of Rabbi Shneur Zalman, founder of the Chabad branch of Hassidism, who was jailed on a trumped-up charge. The jailer, a man knowledgeable in the Bible, decided that this was his chance to ask a scriptural question that had been bothering him, about the story of Adam and Eve. Right after they eat from the tree of knowledge, they are embarrassed and try to cover up and hide. God calls out to Adam, "Where are you?" Why does an omniscient God need to ask?

As a typical rabbi, the Rebbe answered the question with a question: “Do you believe that the Scriptures are eternal and that every generation and every person is included in them?” “Yes,” said the jailor.” “Well then,” said the Rabbi, “God calls to *every* person: ‘Where are *you* in your world? God says something like this: ‘You have lived forty-six years. How far along are you?’”

When the jailer heard his own age mentioned, his heart trembled.

The concept that we all have a unique purpose and mission in life has been strongly emphasized by rabbis from the Hassidic movement to the present day. Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav taught, “The day on which you were created is the day that God decided the world could not continue to be established without you.” Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the father of modern American Orthodoxy, taught that just as Moses was called to his role at the burning bush, so each of us is called to our own *shelichut*, our unique task in the world.

That can sound like each person has just one special task to carry out in life. But I don't think it's so simple. Fulfilling your purpose might be taking up your long deferred dream, or finding your *tikkun*, your repair and healing, on a small or large scale. It could be about your strong relationships and support to others, your service to the world, living out your authentic values in family and community, or a combination of all of the above. My mentor Rabbi Terry Bookman puts it like this, "What do you exist to be?" When you can answer that in a sentence or capture it with an image that really moves you, you can get up every day with excitement knowing you are fulfilling your purpose.

How do you explore and find your mission? My friend Rabbi Naomi Levy, author of *Einstein and the Rabbi*, explains that we are living in a "Selfie" culture, in which we are encouraged to project a superficial image of who we are. Instead, she urges us to take a *soulfie*. We need time away from the busy rush to contemplate our inner lives. No time? You have the next 24 hours. Allow this holy day to be *your*

day to take stock of your soul, to look inside and ask if you are living in congruence with your deeper purpose.

This story of Rabbi Shneur Zalman and the jailor moves me, and not just because of its universal meaning of God asking where we are in our mission in life. It is because the jailor was 46. My father was 46 when he died in an accident. I was only twenty years old, but since then, I could never take life for granted. Almost all of us will have experiences that show us life's fragility and confirm that every moment and every day is a gift. As the saying goes, "That's why they call it 'the present.'" But in case we need any reminding, we have these Days of Awe.

Rosh Hashanah is full of birth imagery, while Yom Kippur has been called a rehearsal of death. We refrain from earthly pleasures and spend the day in spiritual pursuits. Some even wear a *kittel*, a shroud. Our prayers recount the uncertainties and brevity of existence. At the end of the day we pour our souls into a Shema. As Reb Zalman taught, Yom Kippur's rituals represent a "non-fatal death," with the final blast

of the shofar like a baby's cry, signaling our chance to be reborn, to "start a new incarnation" today. If not now, when?

But do we really yearn for that new beginning and what it would demand of us? Rabbi Levy says we could reverse the old Yiddish saying, *Der mench tracht und Gott lacht*, "Man plans and God laughs," to say that "God has great plans for us, but WE laugh." We often ignore our most authentic dreams and deepest aspirations for a life fully lived, because we are afraid of risk, of vulnerability, of failure.

Fulfilling our dreams will rarely go smoothly and easily. There are bound to be obstacles and failures on the way to writing that book, starting that Center for Peace, or resettling a refugee family in a new life. But as some of us discussed at Selichot when reviewing the book *Changing the World from the Inside Out*, by David Jafee, the obstacles can become the very things that we push into for our growth. He writes that we tend to think of religion as providing us with "greater feelings of well-being, transcendence, and connection," yet "another, seemingly opposite goal of spiritual growth is increased yearning." That sense of

deep yearning and that willingness to push our edges and engage our obstacles is what enables us to grow spiritually. As it says in the Talmud, every blade of grass has an angel hovering over it, whispering, "Grow, grow!" At some point we may realize that the journey itself, obstacles and all, is part of our sacred purpose.

Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz teaches that, "We fulfill sacred missions at times, stumble at other times, and sometimes feel totally lost . . . We are chosen because of our essence, not because of what we achieve. We should be angels on a holy mission. We should also be humans who laugh, cry, love, wonder, persevere, sing and dance."

Tonight and throughout this Yom Kippur, I invite you to immerse in this sacred time and to take a soul-fie. I hope that you will find time to laugh, cry, love, wonder, and sing with us. For the next 24 hours, hold these questions in your heart: Where am I? What are my deepest yearnings in life? And if not now, when? When we hear the shofar call tomorrow night, may it signal a new beginning.

There is no gift like the present. If not now, when?