

Breaking Out of the Box

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The New Year is an opportunity for the offering of blessings. Here are a few, courtesy of my colleague, Rabbi Jacob Pressman. For this New Year:

May you be able to get through an entire dinner without a call from a telemarketer.

May the federal government learn the difference between the FBI, the CIA, and AAA, and may they never call the wrong one in a national emergency. But if they do, at least AAA will get there in half an hour.

May you finally learn the difference between your rom, your ram, and your rum; between kilobytes, megabytes, and West Nile Virus bites. And if you can't figure it out, just ask any little kid to explain it to you.

May you ignore political ads loaded with innuendo and ugly character assassination. May you vote your conscience and the candidates of my choice.

Finally, in this New Year, may someone's look of love make your heart swell with pure joy; someone's touch make you feel less alone in the world; and someone's kiss stir you with blissful gratitude that you're alive.

What a world we live in today: "We've been to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to greet a new neighbor; we have conquered outer space but not inner space. We've cleaned up the air, but polluted the soul. We've conquered the atom, but not our prejudice."

"We human beings," writes Rabbi Harold Kushner, "are such complicated creatures...our souls are split, part of us reaching for goodness, part of us chasing fame and fortune and doing questionable things along the way..."

How often do we find ourselves betraying our values, violating our own consciences...often we don't like what we find ourselves doing (although it is remarkable how easily we get used to it)..."

Thankfully, another Rosh Hashanah has come to teach us that hope is real and everything good is possible. Another Rosh Hashanah to remind us that life is all about change and the willingness to begin again, to reinvent ourselves yet again.

The task of the New Year says Kushner is to resolve the conflict "between the longings of our soul and the scoldings of our conscience". The challenge of this New Year says gershon is to make ourselves whole and one, like God is one.

It's not easy. Oftentimes, daily life feels like a non-stop juggling act – a real circus. There is so much to do and so little time to accomplish it. It's like a furiously spinning merry go round that is impossible to get off. It's like being trapped in a box.

Your box may not be my box. But just about all of us are in a box of one sort or another. How do we get out?

Famed author Kurt Vonnegut offers these words of advice: do one thing every day that scares you;

Don't waste your time on jealousy. Sometimes you're ahead, sometimes you're behind. The race is long and, in the end, it's only with yourself; get plenty of calcium and be kind to your knees. You'll miss them when they're gone. Finally, Vonnegut counsels: remember compliments you receive. Forget the insults. If you succeed in doing this, tell me how.

What surely adds to our boxed in feelings are the afflictions caused by the paradoxes of progress. "Despite ever higher living standards and personal freedom, the percentage of Americans who describe themselves as happy has not budged since the 1950's." Living standards keep rising but so does clinical depression. The rise in SUV sales has made us all of us less safe on the road, not more.

Most of us have achieved a high level of success and yet we feel a peculiar emptiness. Somehow "we spend more but have less. We have multiplied our possessions but reduced our values". It's more than the old adage that money cannot buy happiness. There is a dark side to the American dream. "These are the times of steep profits but shallow relationships." Lifestyles devoted to the acquisition of affluence are symptomatic of a deeper problem: "never having enough stems from the feeling of never being enough"

(Rabbi Terry Bookman). So many of us "go through life not knowing what we want but feeling sure this isn't it." despite our material success and technological advances, somehow we feel we have lost our way.

One day a father of a very wealthy family took his son on a trip to the country with the firm purpose of showing him how poor the rest of the world lives. They spent a couple of days and nights on the farm of a very poor family. On their return home, the father asked his son, "How was the trip?"

"It was great dad."

"Did you see how poor people live?" -- "Oh yeah."

"So, my boy, tell me what you learned from the trip?"

The son answered, "Well, dad, I learned that we have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden and they have a creek that has no end. We have installed lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night... We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, and they grow theirs. We have walls around our property to protect us, they have friends to protect them.

The boy's father was absolutely speechless. Then his son added one more thought: Dad, thanks for showing me how poor we are."

Prosperity is a mixed blessing. We are poorer than we think. I am reminded of ecologist Garrett Hardin's favorite saying: "The maximum is not the optimum." There is an antidote to these contemporary ills. Indeed, it may be Judaism's greatest gift to modern civilization. It is the principle of Shabbat. For embedded within Shabbat observance is the concept of establishing boundaries. Modern life is characterized by its ever-increasing erosion of boundaries. The cell phone rings at family dinner. We pick it up. The emails come in on family vacation. We answer them. We have no boundaries. No boundaries make your life into a box. Boundaries are healthy. Shabbat creates boundaries that safeguard our marriages and protect our family lives.

Shabbat reminds us that we do not live to work but work to live. Now we understand why Shabbat truly belongs among the ten commandments. If you want to break out of your box – infuse your life with more boundaries and start observing Shabbat.

Another source of our malaise is boredom. Oscar Wilde said: "something is boring me – I think it's me." what bores us is the absence of sufficient purpose in our lives. My generation has reached midlife. Our youth is over. We are facing the autumn of our lives without a real plan for the next phase. Some of us are confronting the winter of our lives uncertain what has been our lives' meaning and legacy.

At the end of The Chosen, written by the incomparable Chaim Potok, Reuven is worried about how much his father has been overworking on behalf of Zionism and pleads with him to take it easier. His father responds: "human beings do not live forever, Reuven. We live less than the time it takes to blink an eye...I learned a long time ago, Reuven, that a blink of an eye in itself is nothing. But the eye that blinks, that is something. A span of life is nothing. But the man who lives that span, he is something. He can fill that tiny span with meaning, so its quality is immeasurable though its quantity may be insignificant. Do you understand what I am saying? A man must fill his life with meaning; meaning is not automatically given to life. It is hard work to fill one's life with meaning. That I do not think you understand yet. A life filled with meaning is worthy of rest. I want to be worthy of rest when I am no longer here."

If we want to break out of our boxes we have to make every day count for something. We have to dedicate our lives to a cause that is bigger and more important than ourselves.

Finally, Richard Bolles, author of the '70's classic, The Three Boxes of Life taught us that what makes us feel like we're living in a box is the isolation we artificially impose between education, work, and play as we go through life's phases. So when we are in the higher education phase of our lives, we think we have to buckle down and exclude both play and work. It's all about study, study, study.

And when we are in the work phase of our lives, we delude ourselves into believing there is no time for fun or lifelong Jewish learning. It's all about work, work, work. And when we are in the retirement phase of our lives, it's assumed that we will no longer be interested in work or learning "since clearly our brains will have atrophied by then!"

Do we want to get out of the box? Then whichever of the three phases of life we're currently in, incorporate a balance of learning, working, and playing.

Now what's interesting is that all these ways of breaking out of the box -- establishing healthy boundaries, experimenting with Shabbat observance, infusing your life with greater purpose and meaning, integrating more learning, work, and play have one common denominator -- each requires taking something of a risk. Doing something differently. This makes perfect sense:

"For life is not to be measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the number of moments that take our breath away."

Shanah tovah tikateivu. May you be inscribed for a good year in the book of life. Amen.