

Judgment Day: The Long and the Short of It

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On his 90th birthday, a man visits his doctor for his annual physical. The doctor tells him he's in pretty good shape. "Do you think I'll make it to 100?" the man asks.

"Well," the doctor says, "Do you smoke?"

No.

Do you drink?

No.

"Do you ever gamble or drive faster than the speed limit?"

No.

"Do you ever eat foods high in saturated fat?"

No.

"Well, in that case," the doctor says, "why do you want to make it to 100?"

In this special year of our Centennial, maybe it's a healthy fantasy to imagine that we, too, could live for 100 years.

Although I'll tell you: I sure hope that if I make it that long, I'm in better shape than our building.

But even if 100 is a little ambitious, we're all at least trying to make it to next Rosh Hashana. So what's the trick? If today's goal is to be inscribed in the Book of Life, how do we get from here to there?

Rosh Hashana seems to feature two competing narratives.

On the one hand we have the lifelong citizen model. In this picture, a person achieves salvation not by momentary accomplishments or flashes of greatness. Redemption comes as the result of an ongoing, cumulative process.

And I would argue that – of all the characters we meet on Rosh Hashana – no one epitomizes this model more than Chana, who the Talmud counts among those who were remembered today.

For years, she suffers the burden of childlessness. And her plight is exacerbated by the fecundity of her co-wife, Penina. On the surface, she davens, her prayers are answered and she conceives.

But a close reading of the text reveals a different story. Three times the Navi emphasizes the enduring quality of her condition.

Chana and her family would make a pilgrimage to Shilo *מימים ימימה* – every year. *וכן יעשה שנה בשנה* – and every year the same story would unfold.

Even after Chana ultimately gives birth to Shmuel and he enters the service of the Temple, she renews her pilgrimage:

ומעיל קטן תעשה-לו אמו, והעלתה לו מימים ימימה

She would make him a little robe and bring it to him – year in and year out.

The entire narrative is laced with the notion of continued, repetitive acts. So it should come as no surprise to learn that Chana was always engaged in prayer: Both before and after the birth of her son.

And it's a worldview that's echoed in our liturgy – most especially in the section of our Tefillah we call *זכרונות*.

Hashem, we declare, remembers everything: *אין שכחה לפני כסא כבודך ואין נסתר מנגד עיניך*. Nothing is hidden from His view. We're judged according to the sum total of all our actions over the course of our lifetimes.

According to this approach, persistence is the watchword of the day.

But juxtaposed to the lifelong citizen model, is the great moments model. If our proverbial balance sheet is less than stellar, maybe greatness can be considered a function of a few spectacular events.

And I would argue that – of all the characters we meet on Rosh Hashana – no one epitomizes this model more than Yosef. The Gemara tells us that it was on Rosh Hashana that he was released from prison.

Disowned by his family because of the enmity he'd engendered, Yosef had fallen to the lowest rung of the social ladder. He was a slave and a convict with no prospect of salvation. But in one momentary flash, Yosef becomes the viceroy of Egypt. It's one transformative event that sets into motion Yosef's meteoric rise.

And it's a message that's echoed in ונתנב תוקף
מי יחיה ומי ימות
מי יעני ומי יעשיר

Everything is decided so quickly; everything turns on a dime. Salvation isn't achieved over the course of a lifetime; it's won in a heartbeat.

And these two models are captured in the famous statement of the Gemara:

יש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת ויש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים.

There are those who obtain their place in the afterworld in a moment; and there are those who obtain their place after many years.

So which is it?

Is one path preferable to the other? Does every person get to choose?

Are we after inspiration or perspiration?

In August, 1940 an American journalist by the name of Varian Fry arrived in Marseille. An emissary of the Emergency Rescue Committee, he was tasked with spiriting refugees to safety. He had with him a list of two hundred names of those eligible for American visas, and a sum of \$3,000 on his person.

He began writing letters to the people on his list. Rumors of his arrival had spread, and hundreds of people came to ask him for assistance. He soon discovered that the American government was going to offer him no support. Twice he appealed to US Secretary of State Cordell Hull. Both his letters went unanswered.

Faced with the plight of the desperate refugees, Fry decided to act independently and began finding ways - most of which were illegal - to smuggle out those refugees who faced immediate danger of falling into German hands.

"We had no way of knowing who was really in danger and who wasn't," he said.

"We had to guess, and the only safe way to guess was to give each refugee the full benefit of the doubt. Otherwise we might refuse help to someone who was really in danger and learn later that he had been dragged away to Dachau or Buchenwald because we had turned him away."

With no experience in the underground, Fry had to improvise. He set up an office to use any means necessary to save those in harm's way. Once the two hundred US visas were exhausted, Fry started to obtain visas to other countries; a former Viennese cartoonist was hired to forge documents; some refugees were smuggled on French troopships to North Africa disguised as demobilized soldiers. And Fry enlisted the help of people who lived along the French-Spanish border to keep detailed records of the French troop movements. Exploiting their weaknesses, large numbers of refugees quietly slipped through the Pyrenees into Spain.

Fry's activities reached such significant dimensions that it became difficult to keep them secret. In December 1940, he was arrested and held for a time on a prison ship in the Marseille harbor. But nothing deterred him from working on. He remained in France even after the expiration of his passport and continued his rescue activities. He was ultimately arrested by the French police in August 1941, given one hour to pack his belongings, and was then accompanied to the Spanish border. He was told that his expulsion had been ordered by the French Ministry of the Interior in agreement with the American Embassy.

By the end, Fry had saved the lives of some 4,000 people – including Marc Chagall and Jacques Lipschitz. In 1994 he became the first American awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem.

We all know stories of righteous gentiles during the Holocaust. But they were there! Atrocities were occurring before their very eyes and a few decent people stepped forward.

Varian Fry was a Harvard-educated journalist living in Lower Manhattan. He was a family man with no penchant for thrill-seeking behavior. What could compel such a person to take a boat across an ocean to the middle of a World War and launch a full-scale rescue operation to save a group of people with whom he had no connection? Who does such a thing?

Varian Fry didn't wake up one morning and decide to save the world. For years, he'd been thinking and writing about the atrocities being perpetrated in Europe. For years he'd been agitating for an American response. So when the opportunity arose to volunteer for the Emergency Rescue Committee, Fry never hesitated for an instant. He wasn't sitting around preparing to be a hero; but when the moment came and he had to make a decision, he knew exactly what he had to do and he did it.

Yes, there are those who make their name in a flash of greatness. But I would argue that, more often than not, that flash is made possible only by virtue of the groundwork laid over the course of years.

Yosef had spent his whole adolescence dreaming and interpreting dreams. He had spent his whole life envisioning what it would be like to be in a position of authority. So when the opportunity arose, he was thoroughly prepared.

And so it was in the case of the day's other hero: From one perspective, the ordeal of the Akeidah was a test of faith that occurred in an instant. But in fact, it was only after a lifetime of faithful living that Avraham was prepared for such a moment.

Persistence created the environment for something great to happen. And each time it did, a hero emerged.

Maybe it's natural to gravitate to the great moments model. Who wouldn't want to be part of something spectacular or life-altering?

When we look back on this past year, it's the headlines that spring to mind:

- An election
- A terrorist attack
- A scientific breakthrough
- A natural disaster

But each of them was in fact the result of a process with much more history than the headline reveals.

Each of us wants to be a great father or a great daughter; we want to be a great friend or a great sibling; we want to be the one to help in the moment of crisis; to offer the wise solution; to do something heroic.

My point this morning is that opportunities for great moments come most often to those who are great lifelong citizens.

99 times out of 100 what we say or do won't seem heroic; it may even seem prosaic. But if we're faithful to our values, it's those 99 reps that put us in position to be there that 100th time.

As a famous golfer once said when asked for the secret of his success: “I was just lucky. But the funny thing is that the harder I practice, the luckier I become.”

What’s true about our relationship with people is no less true when it comes to our relationship with Hashem. Everyone wants an epiphany – everyone wants to be inspired – everyone wants to find a great spiritual high. Sure there may be exceptions, but by and large that only happens to people who are in the game.

Shul doesn’t speak to strangers; it speaks to people who know its cadences and its rhythms; who traffic in its Tefillos.

Shabbat doesn’t grab the occasional practitioner; it’s when we’re in it week in and week out that it can be transformative.

There may be individuals who obtain their share in the afterworld in a moment – but they’re moments created by weeks and months and years of perspiration.

As we embark on all the promise of possibility of 5778, let’s remember that the path to occasional greatness is paved with everyday goodness.