

“Big Savings”

Shanah Tovah! Have you ever noticed what a ubiquitous term “saving” is in our culture? Stores or products advertise themselves with the words, **BIG SAVINGS**...and then there are all the things that you hear about—via your email inbox, or direct mail campaigns—that need “saving”: polar ice caps, glaciers, the polar bears, the honey bees, elephants, Monarch butterflies (which means “save the milkweed”), the coral reefs, whales, dolphins, the rain forests...and recently I heard on public radio that a large number of North American *birds* (such as the Common Loon) are in danger of disappearing from the United States (though they will survive in Canada) because of climate change. Then of course we Jews are concerned with the saving of *Israel*, saving a healthy, serious community of liberal Jews in the U.S. (the Orthodox seem to be holding their own)—and more locally, saving the Fall River Jewish community.

All this saving! Just think of some of the movies that you have heard of with “saving” in the title: “Saving Nemo,” “Saving Private Ryan,” “Saving Mr. Banks,” and there was a TV series, “Saving Grace.” During the Jewish pilgrimage festivals (Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot), and on Rosh Chodesh we sing:

Ana...hoshia na!

Please, Adonai, save us!

What does it mean to *save* something? Is it simply to keep it in existence, exactly as it is? Or does it require some kind of transformation—perhaps even a metamorphosis—bringing it into a state of being that it has never known before?

It occurs to me that this word, *salvation* (*y’shua*) sounds very “Christian”—while we Jews tend to use the word *redemption* (*g’ulah*): God *redeemed* us from Egypt. We have an obligation to *redeem* Jewish captives or imperiled Jewish communities from captivity, such as Israeli POW’s, Soviet or Ethiopian Jews, etc.

What is the difference? Traditionally, Christians seem to worry more about the individual *soul*—that is, they want to save someone from the fate of going to Hell after he or she dies. Jews focus rather on saving lives in *this* world; and we also tend to focus on *communal* issues rather than on the personal spiritual life. So our gaze is slightly more *outward*.

However, the truth is that we need to keep our gaze on others—*and* on the entire ecosystem of our planet—and *also* concern ourselves with the states of our own souls. And by this, I don’t mean worrying about life after death or the “World to Come”—I mean, rather, making *this* life, this

“one wild and precious life,”

as one of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver, calls it, *count*. In recalling this phrase, I looked up the poem that it comes from, and I would like to share it with you:

The Summer Day

Mary Oliver

**Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?**

Certain life-events cause us to wake up, to pay attention: Next month, my 24 year-old daughter, Mira, is getting married in San Francisco. Wow! How did that happen? It certainly does not feel like that much time has passed since, at the age of 28, I was preparing to be a bride myself. That was 1988. My own mother was just a year older than I am now; as I recall, she had just given up running marathons (because of knee pain), and taken up long-distance bike trips. A year before Mira was born, we went on a mother-daughter biking trip in VT and Western Mass, covering up to 40 miles a day—pushing our bikes up the long hills and hurtling down them, usually stopping somewhere in the course of the day for a dip in a lake or a shower under a waterfall. We have had other memorable trips—one to the Grand Canyon and Zion National Park, as well as to Flagstaff and Sedona, AZ, and Gallup and Santa Fe NM. About 6 years ago we went tent-camping (with Lev) by the Shenandoah River in the Blue Ridge Mountains: Mom said she didn't mind sleeping on the ground—it was the *getting up from the ground* in the morning that led to her to declare that that would be her last camping trip ever!

Now Mom is 82, and I don't know how many more such “adventures” she has left in her. After Mira's and Stefan's wedding Mom and I will take one more spectacular trip: to Big Sur—where the scenery is breathtaking, but the walks are gentle. No tents; no sleeping on—or having to get *up* from--the ground on this trip! When I planned our trip to the great Southwest canyons, I was motivated by my feeling that it would be a shame if my mother—who had been many times to Europe, to the Caribbean, Israel, Costa Rica, and even South Africa, but had never taken in the canyons or desert of our own land—were to go through this life and miss that magnificent landscape. And although she has driven through on her way to somewhere else, Mom has not really spent time at Big Sur either. I expect that this will be the last trip that we take together—at least as far as trips go that involve tramping along the sides of cliffs. Big Sur is one of the most

beautiful landscapes that I have ever beheld, and I want to share it with my mother while she can still get around.

Carpe diem—seize the day—for when our days draw to a close we will never regret the time we have spent beholding beauty, nor the time we took to be with our friends or loved ones. But surely, if we put these things off until it is too late, we will be full of regret—a regret for which there is no remedy.

But—just as we can enjoy the beauty of our national parks—or of this temple—thanks to the vision, generosity, and sacrifices of those who have gone before us and have ensured that they would still be here for us—so we too must pay the favor back by leaving a vital, viable community and planet for our children and our children’s children’s children. And do we not have an obligation as well to all creatures and creation, of which we are supposedly the “crown”? In truth, the tiniest creatures, such as bees or butterflies, phytoplankton or Antarctic krill—are such crucial links in the chain of life that if one of these species is diminished, the whole planet as we know it is in peril.

It is my profound hope that you feel re-connected by these High Holy Day services and season—re-connected to God, to the Jewish community, to all Israel...to your family and friends, to creation, for Rosh haShanah, after all, is called “the birthday of the world.” But it is important not just to be re-connected, re-charged; but to have a “take away.” What will you *take away* from these services, from this season, from this sermon?

Here is my own “New Year’s Resolution”:

I resolve to rejoice! to enjoy this gorgeous world;

I resolve to love my family and friends deeply, without forgetting the less fortunate, both nearby and far away.

I resolve not to forget the birds and the beasts, the microscopic animals and the Redwoods.

I resolve to keep in my mind that I owe a debt to those who came before me: to those who worked and sacrificed so that we might still be able to enjoy this temple in which we pray, and the greater temple Planet Earth in which we play.

I resolve to repay this debt by following their examples, working to preserve these things for those who come after me.

In the words of Hillel [1st century CE sage]:

- אם אין אני לי, מי לי? וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני? ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי?
 - *Im ein ani li, mi li? U'kh'she'ani le'atzmi, mah ani? V'im lo 'akhshav, eimatai?*
 - **If I do not look out for myself, who will look out for me? But if I am only out for myself, what am I? [or: *what value does my life have?*] And if not now—when?**
 - Pirkei Avot 1:14

When all is said and done, no one can adequately explain the *meaning* of our lives. Why are we here? Why did God choose to create us? Or—if you don't believe in a god who "chooses"—how is it possible that we emerged out of a non-conscious process beginning with the big bang? However you look at it, it is miraculous—it "blows your mind," to quote our son, Lev. We are here today to give thanks, and to find direction in making our small blip of existence *count*. There are many philosophical paths and spiritual technologies in the world today which can help people make sense of their lives—helping them to lead *good, satisfying, and meaningful* lives. Our Jewish path is just one of them. But I personally think it is a *great* one; and so I hope and pray that this year, our communal and spiritual lives as Jews at Temple Beth El will deepen and flourish. Please consider coming back not just for the holidays, but for ordinary Shabbat services, for Monday or Thursday morning minyan, for adult ed; sign up for our new initiative *Chai Mitzvah* [more about that later], get involved in a social action project, join our book group, or even the mahjong club! Revive your spirit, make new friends, make your life count. Leave a rich legacy for those who come after you.

May you all be inscribed in the Book of Life for a sweet and fulfilling New Year.

L'Shanah tovah tikateivu.