

## **MAKING THE MOST OF TODAY AND TOMORROW – by Rabbi Tom Heyn for Nov/Dec Chai Lites**

When it comes to writing, I have a tendency toward being a perfectionist. I want the finished product to be worth reading, but because I know the process could take awhile, I usually end up procrastinating or avoiding it altogether. I find some consolation in knowing that I'm not alone.

There is a story told by Winston Lord, a US diplomat who served as a speechwriter for Henry Kissinger in the early 70s. He had finished writing a speech and Kissinger called him in the next day and said, "Is this the best you can do?" Lord tells the rest of the story in his own words: I said, "Henry, I thought so, but I'll try again." So I go back in a few days, another draft. He called me in the next day and he said, "Are you sure this is the best you can do?" I said, "Well, I really thought so. I'll try one more time." Anyway, this went on eight times, eight drafts; each time he said, "Is this the best you can do?" So I went in there with a ninth draft, and when he called me in the next day and asked me that same question, I really got exasperated and I said, "Henry, I've beaten my brains out - this is the ninth draft. I know it's the best I can do: I can't possibly improve one more word." He then looked at me and said, "In that case, now I'll read it."

I've come to the conclusion that whatever I write, or whatever I do in general, could always be better. I now see myself as a work in progress and my hope is that I can continue to learn and improve over time. Ideally, tasks that once seemed difficult will become easier to accomplish, with greater proficiency. It doesn't always work out that way, but I'm determined to keep trying. As one Jewish proverb puts it, "From success to failure is one step; from failure to success is a long road."

This proverb is true in many situations but it also applies, in a general way, to the two tasks in which we are all engaged. In my High Holy Day sermons, I spoke about the purpose of our lives in the context of *Tikkun HaNefesh* and *Tikkun HaOlam* – the work of repairing the soul and repairing the world. It's possible to see everything we do as contributing to one or both of these aims. Using the metaphor of a tree, I spoke about *Tikkun HaNefesh* as corresponding to the roots and *Tikkun HaOlam* as corresponding to the branches. Both are essential in the natural cycle of giving and receiving; of nourishing the air, soil and creatures it sustains, and being nourished by them in return.

So it is with us. Whether we recognize it or not, our satisfaction and fulfillment comes from our engagement in the work of *Tikkun*; that is, in the process of making things better. Sometimes it just happens naturally through our activities and relationships, but at other times it's hard, even painful. I've come to realize that this simple truth sums up the nature of being human. If only it were easy all the time but, alas, we cannot avoid being challenged. If we can accustom ourselves to embracing challenges and difficulties as opportunities to make something better, we embrace our destiny as human beings and achieve our purpose in life.

Over time, when this attitude of embracing challenges becomes a daily practice, what once seemed difficult becomes easier. Bit by bit, our lives begin to reflect a saying that has been attributed to various personalities over the past few centuries (none of them Jewish, as far as I know): "The difficult is what takes a little time; the impossible is what takes a little longer."

It's inspiring to meet people who have adopted and internalized this attitude of persistence and determination. A good percentage of them are Jewish and have accomplished what might have otherwise been impossible, from the founding of the State of Israel to a long list of other monumental achievements. There seems to be something in our DNA or our culture which compels us, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it, "to protest against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet, but ought to be."

When we meet people like this, we learn from them; not only from what they say but from their example. It's like when two guitars are placed together and the string on one is plucked; the corresponding string on the other guitar also vibrates. This is called sympathetic resonance, and it happens energetically when we come in contact with extraordinary people. Reading about an individual's accomplishments can be inspiring, but having the chance to be with that individual in person creates a deeper and more lasting impression or resonance.

During the weekend of November 18-20, we will have the opportunity to learn from someone who has inspired and empowered thousands of individuals to become "mitzvah heroes." Danny Siegel will be our Scholar-in-Residence that weekend. He is a well-known author, lecturer, and poet who has spoken in more than 500 Jewish communities around the country on Jewish values and *tzedakah*. He is the author of about thirty books on Jewish values and has organized *tzedakah* projects that have helped distribute millions of dollars to people in need.

Our programming over the course of this year will be designed to inspire and empower us in the work of *Tikkun HaNefesh* and *Tikkun HaOlam*. Danny Siegel is a master in the work of repairing the world and we are sure to benefit from his visit, both individually and collectively. Along with many other programs and services we are offering in the coming months, my hope is that more members of our congregational family will join me in seeing all that we do as "a work in progress." Our goal is not perfection but continuous improvement and engagement. As Rabbi Tarfon said in a collection of wise sayings (*Pirke Avot* 2:16), "It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either."

Although this article went through about seven or eight drafts, I can say that it was the best I could do under the circumstances. It will probably not be remembered as a great work of literature but my goal has been to make this point very clear: that everything is "a work in progress." By inspiring and empowering one another in the tasks we share in common, and by being inspired and empowered by others who are engaged in other ways, we can come to vibrate at ever-higher frequencies and accomplish what we once thought was impossible.

Things may never be perfect but with the right effort and the right attitude, things will continue to improve. As Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav once said, "If you are not a better person tomorrow than you are today, what need have you for a tomorrow?" Please join me and Danny Siegel and so many others as we make the most of today -- and tomorrow.