

*Build Your Life as if it Were a Work of Art*

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I want to begin my d'var Torah tonight by telling a story about Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the most important rabbis, scholars, activists and philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ten days before he died in 1972, Rabbi Heschel taped a television show for NBC. You can find clips of the interview on YouTube. At the end of the program, with about a minute left in the broadcast, the interviewer asked Heschel if he had a special message for young people. Heschel thought for a moment and replied that he did and this is what he said:

He said, "I would say to young people a number of things, and I know I only have one minute (left in the program). I would say, Remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Know that every deed counts, that every word has power. And each of us should do our share to redeem the world, in spite of all absurdities, and all the frustrations, and all the disappointment. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to live your life as if it were a work of art."

Heschel continued,

"When you're young, start working on this great work of art called your own existence. First, remember the importance of self-discipline. Second, don't read the best-sellers rather study the great sources of wisdom. And, third, remember that life is a celebration, or *can be* a celebration. There's much entertainment in our lives. And entertainment destroys our initiative and weakens our imagination. What's *really* important is to teach men and women how to celebrate life."

I'd like to share with you some of the ways that I'm thinking about Heschel's words as this New Year begins. Now, I've been studying Jewish texts and thinking about the

teachings of Judaism for quite some time and I think that you can distill a lot of the wisdom of our tradition into one phrase: *What we do in this world matters*. What we do in this world matters. Which is just a different way of saying that every deed that we do counts and every word that we speak has power. Jews don't live in a world of illusion: Happiness and sadness, need and hunger, grief and rejoicing, justice and injustice aren't illusions. They are real and through our actions we have the power to shape and change and repair a bit of what is wrong with this broken world.

And, our words have power: Power to hurt or wound but also the power to heal and comfort. Which is good because human beings make mistakes. We wish we could be perfect but we are not perfect. We hurt people who we love, we lose control of our temper, we speak with sarcasm or worse. But if we realize what we said, and regret what we did, then words can have tremendous power. When was the last time you said, or heard the words, "I was thinking about our fight and I wanted to tell you that I'm really sorry about what I said. I'm sorry I was thoughtless. I'm sorry that I hurt you." If you mean them, those words have magical power to repair friendships, to open closed doors, to begin to set things right. In this New Year, we have the power to admit to the things we have done wrong and change the way we act in the year to come. And if our deeds are real, if our words have power, then life is not absurd (I can't speak for our government). At least, our small part of the world, doesn't have to be absurd. Our words and our actions, our thoughtfulness and compassion, can fill our lives with meaning.

But we don't have all the time in the world to get this right. As it says in the Mishna, the day is short and the task is great. Time goes so quickly and in our tradition, we only go around once. The deepest wisdom that I have found to confront that reality is to learn how to celebrate life full throttle, as Heschel says, not to settle for cheap entertainment but to strive for real celebration.

Celebrating life is about being fully and actively engaged in the life you are living. It's not about being happy all the time. No one can be happy all the time. If you care about the world, about people, about causes, no sane person goes through life without times of stress or doubt, grief or disappointment. Last Sunday, I did the unveiling for a friend of mine who died last year and a bunch of friends and family stood around his grave and we felt really sad but we knew why we felt sad because that person had brought love and celebration and fun into our lives and we told stories and laughed and cried and *celebrated* his life and how fortunate we were to know him even as we mourned his death.

Celebration is full, conscious engagement. I think about this a lot when I talk to students on campus and caution people not to confuse *fun* with *celebration*. It's fine to have fun but you haven't reached the higher level of celebration if you spend too much time in activities that leave you comatose and when you wake up, you don't remember what you did the night before. You are not fully engaged in life when you spend too much time as a spectator. Life is not meant to be a spectator sport. I might get in trouble with some friends here, and there is nothing wrong with watching a great football or baseball game on T.V. but I'm going to go out on a limb and maintain that if you like sports, you should spend at least as much time *playing* sports as you do *watching* sports. Real life doesn't happen on a screen and you won't find your life by looking there. I really like Mark Helprin's books and in *Winter's Tale* Helprin explains write about the main character, Peter Lake, and explains that what made this man so unique was that he knew (and I quote) "that the treasures of the earth are movement, courage, laughter and love." That's one of the quotes I have up next to my desk because it keeps me focused on being fully engaged with my life. Celebrations make us laugh, make us love our friends, make us get up and move, give us memories we cherish. This year, I want to do a really good job celebrating life.

But the piece of Heschel's advice that I've been thinking about the most is this:  
*Above all, remember that you must build your life as if it were a work of art.*

I've been trying to figure out exactly what that means and often, when I want to come to a deeper understanding, I just start asking people on campus--students, faculty, staff-- for their opinions and interpretations. So I just started wandering around campus and asking people. What does it mean to build your life as if it were a work of art? What does that mean to you? (God, I love my job.)

One friend reflected on Heschel's words and said that each work of art, real art, is unique, expressing a singular vision of the artist. So, he continued, "I think it means that we should make sure we live the life that each of us is meant to be living. Pay attention to your values, your priorities. Live the unique life that *you* were meant to live."

A student who I asked started to talk about the act of painting and how when you paint, you have to zoom in and focus your attention to small details but then you need to step back and get some distance in order to get the larger perspective on the work you are creating. He said, "It's about the balance of focusing on the thing right in front of you but never forgetting that you have to step back to see the big picture."

I kept asking more people: A faculty friend said, "When you paint a painting, you are always painting over the mistakes you made, correcting them, fixing things that don't feel or look right. Great art, and a real life, is built on a series of "do-overs."

Her words spoke to me. When artists create great art, they take risks. They paint outside the lines. And they're not held back by fear of failure. Because if you take risks, you will, you must, experience some failure. On Rosh HaShanah, I often think of one my favorite quotes from the superb sax player, John Coltrian, who said, "If you're not hitting some wrong notes, that means you're not playing hard enough." Listen to his solo on "My Favorite Things" if you want to understand what it means to tell a unique story, to take some risks and construct a work of art.

But what would it mean for you to build your life as if it were a work of art? How would this year look different if that was how you approached your life?

I want to repeat Heschel's words: *Remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Know that every deed counts, that every word has power. Learn how to celebrate life. Above all, remember that you must build your life as if it were a work of art.*

Tonight, a new year begins, a year of promise and possibility. A wonderful day, a great year, a life well-lived doesn't just happen. We build our life with creativity and courage, thoughtful words and well-considered actions. We look at, and acknowledge, and own, our mistakes and then we paint over them to create a more vibrant picture of the person we truly are, the person we most want to be. May this be a great year, a year of growth and fulfillment, a year of celebration and peace. Shanah tovah!