

KOL NIDREI

It Just Doesn't Matter

Tis' the season of college applications. High school seniors around the nation are getting ready to get those applications in. What schools will I apply to? What schools will accept me? What will my friends think or what will the parents of my friends think or what will the friends of my parents think? What will the schools think of my personal essay or my SAT score or my PSAT score or my ACT score? Will they like my grade point average or the clubs I've belonged to or the sports that I've played? Will I be accepted, or waitlisted, or rejected? Will I get into my first choice? Will I not even get into my safety?

As a Rabbi, I have had a very unique front row seat to this process – seeing kids time and again go through the stress of applying to college –

Through it all, I have come to one very specific conclusion about the whole ordeal.

It just doesn't matter.

Let me say that again and this time, a little more clear.

It just doesn't matter.

The amount of stress that goes into the college search process is not equivalent to the final decision of where one goes to school. And the decision of where one goes to school – it is not equal to one's life potential.

I've seen it too many times – kids and their families stress so much about college and then ultimately come back and tell me that their stress was not worth it. They eventually find a school; and they realize

that there was not one single fit – that much of college is what you make of it—and that the application process has very little to do with the college experience.

Now, fortunately, we have professionals, like our very own Melinda Koss, who now help kids and their families go through this process and help them to make this realization in order to make smart choices.

But still, every year, I see so many people stress and I see so many people make others around them stress as well.

Shara and I are about to go through this process too, so let me state this one more time again, loud enough so Shara especially can hear it.

It just doesn't matter.

If these words sound familiar, you probably saw the movie *Meatballs*, a 1978 comedy about summer camp. In the film, Bill Murray is a camp counselor who is trying to explain to his campers that it doesn't matter if they win or lose in their contest against the wealthy camp across the lake.

Murray says,

“Even if every man, woman and child held hands together and prayed for us to win, it just wouldn't matter...”

He gets the campers to yell it out in a kind of chant – and they do it with fervor and excitement, saying again and again – it just doesn't matter.

Clearly, Bill Murray is telling these kids to focus more on having fun, on being themselves and not on over-emphasizing these artificial barometers that our world sets up too often.

In a sense, Bill Murray and the baby boomer comedians who came of age during his prime all had this message in their routines – take life a little less seriously and stop making such enormous issues out of life’s most trivial matters.

It may sound simple and superficial and maybe even a bit hyperbolic, but it’s a lesson too often forgotten.

There are so many aspects of our lives that we can apply this thinking to – so many areas of life where we needlessly spend so much energy and stress because we’re told that we have to, only to discover in the end, yes, it just didn’t matter all that much.

Today is the beginning of Yom Kippur – a day that most certainly matters – and it may seem a strange exercise for a rabbi to use this moment to announce the futility of life. If anything, I should be using a sermon to explain to you how incredibly important life is and how things do matter.

But in a time when mental illness is on the rise, a time in which anxiety and depression are touching so many lives – I think it behooves us to consider how we often decide that certain areas of our life need more attention than they actually deserve – in spending so much time on these areas, we lose ourselves and we have no ability to take hold of that which actually does matter.

I have to be honest – this is a big issue for me – especially at this time in my career. Our synagogue is going through a major transition, and I spend a lot of time thinking about how all of you are feeling about it. I

worry – ask Shara – I do a lot of worrying. But so often, this incessant worrying does so little to actually help me. Instead, it takes me away from what really matters.

The other day, I was sitting with Kaleb watching a Cleveland Guardians game. Before we turned the game on, I had received an email from someone that had upset me. All I wanted to do as I watched the game was answer that email – I was obsessing about it and thinking about it and as I kept it up, I realized – I was not there at all with my son. He turned to me and he said, “Dad, where are you?” It made me sad – it makes me really sad to think about sacred moments lost because we are stuck obsessing and worrying about stuff that matters less than we think it does.

It’s a challenge for us – turning off anxiety and being present in the moment.

How many times have you not been present for someone you love because you’ve been obsessing about something that so often doesn’t matter all that much?

Yom Kippur is a day in which we rehearse our death. We stop eating, traditionally, we dress in white shrouds that we are buried in, we don’t engage in most life-sustaining activities – everything about this day is meant to direct our attention to our own demise.

The purpose is not to make us afraid; nor to make us depressed – but rather to wake us up – to wake us up to the fact that we have focused our energies on too many trivial matters, often at the expense of that which really means something.

I recognize that this is not easy – it is not easy to walk away from something that you feel deserves your time and attention – we are

conditioned to care and to invest energy in all matters and pulling away from what we have told ourselves is important is not easy.

In Jewish mysticism, there is an idea called *Tzimtzum* – which can be translated roughly as retraction. The idea is that in order for God to create the world, God needed to retract and create space. God literally needed to become smaller – in order to allow the rest of creation to exist.

We too need this kind of ability to pull back – to make ourselves a little smaller and to create space for others, not trying so hard to control everything, not trying so hard to manipulate and constantly having to be involved in every area of the world.

The ultimate purpose of Shabbat is to remind us to do just this – to take a break from the constant jockeying we do to try and control everything.

Shabbat is a weekly reminder that life can wait, that we need time for what's most important in our lives, and that often the stuff we're trying so hard to control is uncontrollable.

Most of us are really bad at Shabbat because our culture doesn't really embrace it. In our country, Saturday is often a day to take care of all the errands you had no time to take care of during the week.

While most people in this room do not work on Saturday, how many actually take time on that day to put away the small things and focus on what matters – how many actually take the time on a weekly basis to really invest that day with sanctity and holiness.

Of note, when Shara and I lived in Jerusalem in 2005 – Shabbat was a part of the city's social fabric. On Saturday, the entire city shut down

and you were forced to spend time away from the matters that weighed you down during the week. In 2005 Jerusalem, Shabbat was still a communal value and it wasn't so hard to incorporate it into your life.

Today, Jerusalem has actually changed and it is much more like the rest of the world. Now, on Shabbat in Jerusalem, you can go shopping and go to restaurants and do all that you usually do.

The Shabbat spirit is different there today – there are more people working and less giving time to their families. It's almost like the city relented and gave in to the societal trend to never put anything down or anything away – to never say that some things just don't matter.

You see, our world tells us that certain matters are so important, that they deserve our attention, they deserve our constant worrying and our obsessing.

The college application process is like so many other aspects of our lives –where we're told that this is the biggest deal in the entire world and you have to drive yourself absolutely bonkers about it – you can't stop thinking about, you can't stop wondering how you're going to deal with it and how you are going to get through it, and you have to compare yourself to everyone else and try your best to do better than them and if you think you haven't, you have to feel terrible about it.

Sound familiar?

When we used to drop my grandfather off at his house after going out to dinner, he would always stay at his door watching us drive down the street.

I remember driving away and just seeing this old man standing there, staring at us and getting smaller and smaller. To be honest, I'm not even sure if he ever went inside or whether he was just standing there for the next time we picked him up. When I got dropped off at my house from a date with my grandparents, I sprinted into the house faster than anything. I was done and ready to play Nintendo or call a friend. But he waited – he waited till our car disappeared down the road.

Now, I realize that my grandfather wanted to make sure we were safe – but I also think, he savored time with us – and he wanted to extend it as much as possible. He literally stood at that door waiting for us to go down the street because he wanted to spend just a little more time with us.

What if we all could be so present in moments that matter most – what if we could put away all that which is holding us back – do a little bit of that tzimtzum – that spiritual retraction-- and really appreciate the moment.

Friends, so much of what we spend so much energy on really just doesn't matter – so much of the obsessive caring we do is un-productive and leading us to lose aspects of our lives that we will never get back...

Take a look around you – whether you are here with us or at home, recognize how lucky you are to be alive and to be with people who love and care about you. That is what matters.

Shanah Tovah.

