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Erev Rosh HaShana 5777
October 2, 2016

LISTS of Our LIVES

What makes this rabbi anxious about a High Holiday sermon?

My “Top Ten List” for this evening of Rosh HaShana:

10. I wrote it so long ago that the news has already changed
9. I wrote it so recently, that I missed some headline all of you have read
8. I left a page in the printer
7. Someone’s cellphone will ring right at a pivotal moment
6. My cellphone will ring at a pivotal moment
5. My eyeglasses will break
4. The air temperature in the sanctuary will be too warm
Or # 3, too cold
2. You will think it’s too long

And the number one worry I have about a High Holiday sermon: You will think it’s too short!

I love lists – I always have. I love making them. Writing them and re-writing them. I love crossing items off my checklist during the day. I have been known to write an errand or task on my list AFTER it has been accomplished – just so I can check it off! I write them in pen. And in pencil. Monochrome and color-coded. I write them on napkins and post-it notes, on my phone and my laptop. I write them on scraps of paper and on yellow legal pads. Sometimes they are confidential; sometimes they are posted for others to see.

My mother taught me to make a list – from a hat to shoes – of the clothing I needed to pack for a sleepover or a trip. I actually still use that head-to-toe technique. When my children were little and their equipment, toys and food took up more room than they did, I had copies of a packing list for each trip or overnight with the grandparents, lest I forget their diapers or their favorites – Deborah’s plush bumble-bee (named Mr. Bee), the tattered car-blanket for Gabe, or Sam’s stuffed animal du jour.

As the weeks of summer come to an end and the high holidays approach, the list on the mind of most pulpit rabbis is, “What will I preach about this year?” And no, no one sends us topics – though that would be helpful.

There is the holiday favorite:

- Blessings and new beginnings

Or the ever popular:

- Repentance, Sin & Forgiveness

The current issues:

- Civil rights and social justice
- The State of Israel

- Politics and the upcoming election
- Or the sermon about why I am not speaking about politics and the upcoming election

Then there are the Bible stories of the holidays:

- The Binding of Isaac
- Adam and Eve in the Garden
- Jonah and the 'big fish'
- and Isaiah the prophet

This season I will pick from several on *this* list in the coming days. But the sermon topic from my *list* tonight is (you probably figured it out already) LISTS. I knew it was my topic – before I knew WHY it was my theme.

The world, my world and our world, feels overwhelming and in disarray. The list of disasters and tragedies grows longer. Many are helpless, fearful and sad. We are barraged with more images and new information. There are blessings, too: friendships and loves and accomplishments. Sweet memories that get lost or hidden or forgotten in the shadows. We have responsibilities and tasks – from the mundane to the monumental. There is so much work to be done – to repair that which is breached -- from the personal to the political.

I sometimes feel like Sisyphus, the king of Corinth in Greek mythology. As a punishment for his actions, he was destined to push a boulder up a mountain, only to have it continually roll back down as he continued to push it up. Of course I don't think of it as my punishment but I often do carry the image of Sisyphus with me.

How do we find the stamina to climb our mountains?
Where can we find the elusive instruction book of life?
How do we tackle our boulders?

How and where? One place is on a list.

Lists and inventories and balance sheets help me. They ease my anxiety and give me structure. And through them, I begin to find strength and insight and inspiration. There is actually a long list of "Why" people love lists. Who knew? The Italian novelist and philosopher, Umberto Eco (who died earlier this year), wrote a book, titled, The Infinity of Lists. His central thesis is that in Western culture there is a passion for all kinds of lists: lists of saints, catalogues of plants, collections of art. In 2009, Eco was invited to create an exhibit at the Louvre in Paris. His subject? The essential nature of lists. When asked why he selected such a seemingly commonplace topic, Eco explained it this way: (Interview with Spiegel)

The list is the origin of culture. It's part of the history of art and literature. What does culture want? To make infinity comprehensible. It also wants to create order -- not always, but often. And how does one face infinity? How does one attempt to grasp the incomprehensible? [Eco asks] Through lists, through catalogs, through collections in museums, through encyclopedias

and dictionaries. [Eco gives this example about the atmosphere] We have always been fascinated by infinite space [he writes], by the endless stars and by galaxies upon galaxies. How does a person feel when looking at the sky? He thinks that he doesn't have enough tongues to describe what he sees. Nevertheless, people have never stopped describing the sky, simply listing what they see there.

Just as the skies and seas are limitless, facts and knowledge about the vast universe and about the tiniest cells expand and increase every day. The knowledge we have is fascinating and astounding -- and excessive too.

Last year on the high holidays I spoke about a book called, Being Mortal, by Atul Gawande, an author, surgeon, writer and public health researcher. Another one of his books is called The Checklist Manifesto. Dr. Gawande speaks about the difference between ignorance and, in a sense, a surplus of knowledge. He cites the dramatic advances in science, medicine and technology. Despite these advances, tragedies still occur. And he began to ask why.

In his book he explains that *"the volume and complexity of knowledge has exceeded our ability to properly deliver it to people. [It has become unwieldy.] On airline flights there is a check-list for safety; in medical emergencies there is a check-list for procedures and protocols. Knowledge has both saved us and burdened us. We need a different strategy for overcoming failure [Gawande describes]. ...And there is such a strategy – though it will seem almost ridiculous in its simplicity. It is a checklist,"* Gawande concludes.

And if lists can help make order out of the chaos in the cosmos and in life around us – if they can make the infinite, feel finite; the insurmountable, attainable, perhaps they can do the same for the vast inner world we live in – the world of our spirits, our very humanity. I know for me, challenges and struggles become more manageable when I list them.

I have a document on my computer written some time ago. I see the title on the screen and sometimes I don't give it a second thought; other times I pause for a moment, considering a click to open it. Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't. The document is a list, with sub-lists and bullet points about various issues I was contemplating which were overwhelming at the time.

I remember the feeling – my head swimming in the chaos of life that evening – life as we all have professional and personal, in relationships and in projects and tasks. I felt I was going to explode or implode – neither good options -- and I opened the new, blank screen, and began to write. The process calmed me and motivated me. Reading that list every few months remains both cathartic and grounding. The list reminds me of unfinished business. It also reminds me that much has been accomplished, resolved or simply faded over time. And perhaps I am not going to drown after all.

We can also make lists when we feel fortunate and grateful. I pause to appreciate the depth of the good in my life, the blessings, when I stop long enough to enumerate them.

As Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote: *How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height My soul can reach, I love thee freely, I love thee purely, How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.*

Of course, let's not forget that singer song-writer, Paul Simon, gave us "50 ways to leave your lover."

Lists help us prioritize how we use limited time, energy and space.

A professor of philosophy held up a large empty jar in front of her class and proceeded to fill it with rocks. She asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was full. So the professor picked up a box of pebbles and poured them into the jar. She shook the jar lightly and watched as the pebbles rolled into the open spaces between the rocks. The professor asked the students again if the jar was full. They chuckled and agreed that now it was indeed full this time. The professor picked up a box of sand and poured it into the jar. The sand filled the remaining small open areas. "Now," said the professor, "It is full."

She continued, "I want you to recognize that this jar signifies your life. The rocks are the truly important things, such as family, health and relationships. If all else was lost and only the rocks remained, your life would still be meaningful. The pebbles are the other things that matter in your life, such as work or school. The sand signifies the remaining 'small stuff' and material possessions. If you put sand into the jar first, there is no room for the rocks or the pebbles. The same can be applied to your lives. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are truly important."

On Rosh HaShana, we ask, what are the rocks, the pebbles and the sand on our lists? Then there is the list we compose when we are wrestling with making a decision.

A friend and now-colleague, David, was living in Israel many years ago and had to decide if he was going to stay there permanently, to make *Aliyah* (meaning 'going up.')

Or was he going to move back home to New Jersey from Jerusalem at the end of the year; the Hebrew term for this is *Yeridah* ('going down'). David had his Aliyah/Yeridah list on his refrigerator all year. Depending upon what happened during the day (the headlines were particularly troublesome or the sunset was breathtaking), in the evening he put a checkmark under one of the two. I guess there were more checks under Yeridah, because he did end up coming back to the States. To this day, I think of that image and his words when I have to evaluate issues and make a tough choice.

I recently learned that author, Ray Bradbury, suggests that a free-flowing list allows us to be creative and thoughtful. Apparently, he used to make long lists of nouns as triggers for ideas and stories. On the high holidays, we can follow Bradbury's advice when he recommends: "Make a list of ten things you hate and tear them down in a short story or a poem (or in a

prayer, we might add at this season). Then make a list of ten things you love and celebrate them.”

There are many significant, Jewish lists too: There is *Schindler's List* and various lists of the 613 commandments in the Torah. Medieval philosopher, Maimonides, created a list of God's attributes. On the high holidays we can count and classify the blasts of the Shofar.

During our worship we recite an alphabetical list of sins in Hebrew— Aleph, Bet, Gimel: Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gadalnu – and in English – A, B & C, the sins of Arrogance, Bigotry and Cynicism. This listing helps us to organize our thoughts; to find a way to identify our transgressions so we can begin taking steps to teshuva, to hike up the hill to repentance and renewal.

The high holidays urge us to compile our lists:

- of blessings and flaws;
- of behaviors we would like to change and things that make us proud;
- of breaches and cracks in the world around us and the world within us –
- all in desperate need of repair.

This Rosh HaShana, the eve of 5777, I would ask, What's on Your Lists?