

Aizey Who Ashir – Who is Rich? Rosh Hashana 5764

Have you noticed that a new phenomenon has lately proliferated on television? Almost any time of the day or night, you can grab the remote, and find some kind of makeover show.

There's "While You Were Out" and "Trading Spaces," where families and friends make over each other's houses. There's "What Not To Wear," in which young women, featured for their extreme tacky taste, are first ridiculed, then re-educated by hip fashion police. Then, of course, there's that very entertaining show, "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," in which five Gay men lend their cooking, grooming, decorating, & social skills to a straight guy in need of major refinement. Finally, there's the program that has to trump them all, "Extreme Makeover," in which a self-deprecating subject, is completely made over – including plastic & dental surgery.

Aside from their entertainment value, I'm wondering what these shows actually do for us? For some of us, at least, I would have to guess that they make us feel out of shape, that our clothes need updating, and that a little nip and tuck probably wouldn't hurt either. They reflect a culture in which model gorgeous is the ideal, a culture that idolizes perfect people who wink at us from billboards, in commercials, and even on our web pages (right next to that little stop snoring ad that my wife would like me to pay attention to).

But is it the right message? As we come here tonight/day to try in some way to perfect ourselves, is this a worthy goal?

One of the things our rabbis marveled at some 1,500 years ago, is the uniqueness of every human being. Just look around you - there has never been, nor will there ever be another person like you. We are each one of a kind.

A midrash teaches, that this is the miracle of creation. Whereas a mint stamps out coins from one master dye, and every one of the coins comes out exactly the same – it is not so with us. For God also created *us* from one master dye, so to speak – the biological blueprint of Adam – yet every single person is unique.

Judaism rejoices in our differences. When we aspire to be like a manufactured media image, or to imitate someone we're not, we are betraying our nature, the unique biological code with which we were each endowed.

Should a 45 year old mother need to starve herself so she can imitate her teenage daughter's style of wearing tight jeans and an exposed midriff? Should a middle aged man require a face lift and a hair transplant, to feel worthy in our community?

In Pirke Avot, our sages ask: "*Aizey who ashir? Who is rich?*" And they answer: "*Ha-sameach b'chelko!* The one who is happy in his or her portion!"

Each and every one of us already has very special gifts. Some of them we know about. Others, we have yet to uncover. Rather than trying to be someone else, Judaism asks us simply to be ourselves, our best selves – to deepen our own characters, to widen our own hearts and souls, to cultivate our special talents.

In Jewish Law, there's a principle called, "Bal Tashchit" – do not waste or destroy. It's applied to many things in our tradition – to the environment, our natural resources, and also to our own human potential.

We are actually forbidden by Jewish Law to squander our talents. If we have musical ability, we're obligated to pursue it, if we have mathematical skills we have to expand them, if we have artistic vision, we need to realize it. Otherwise, we are guilty of a sin – the sin of wasting the precious life God entrusted to us, and not contributing to the world, that which we could have.

The heart of the matter is this: if we try to be someone else, then we can never be ourselves, and unlock that potential that lies within us – no matter how tacky the clothes are in our closet. Today, as we think about change, let's understand what's being asked of us. To be us – the best us we can possibly be.

I know many people who are afraid to change until they get the wake up call - the first heart attack, the untimely death of a young friend. Then they go all out on the exercise routine, they change out of their stressful jobs, take up new hobbies, and spend more time with their families. But I would ask: why should we wait for tragedy? "*Zeh ha-yom asah Adonai, nagilah v'nismecha vo* – This is the day God has made, let us be happy and rejoice in it!"

Not only does Judaism command us to cultivate our unique blessings, but there's also another thing that's required of us – and that is, to enjoy our blessings, every one of them! They come in many different shapes and forms. Sometimes they're very hard to see. A friend of mine recently had surgery related to his cancer. Before he went into the hospital, he sent this email:

Dear Friends,

My deepest thanks to each and every one of you for the overwhelming expressions of love & support you have shown me always and, especially, during these last few months. I've often said, "The universe sometimes gives us great gifts in very ugly wrappings." I've received the gift the cancer came to give.

For this friend, cancer was a gift, because it opened his eyes. He saw how richly he was blessed with caring friends. He came to realize how deeply appreciated are his particular artistic talents. He started to really feel in his heart that his presence here in the world matters to a whole community of people.

Aizey who ashir? Ha-sameach b'chelko! The rich person is the one who is happy in his portion.

Of late, in this economic recession, a number of our congregants have lost their jobs. And, as I talk with them, I find a common theme. Most of them have been connected in one way or another with the technology sector - which, up until the recession, had been booming in San Diego. They worked in very high pressure jobs – whether on the technical side or the business side. Their jobs usually involved lots of travel away from home, heavy deadlines, and long hours every week. In fact, in many of their companies, all of this is worn like a badge of honor. The implicit understanding is – if you don't want to work 70 hours a week, then there's always someone younger and more eager right behind you, ready to step into your place.

What I found is, that a number of these men and women have actually been relieved to lose their jobs! And after rebounding, they vowed they would never go back into that work environment again.

By the way, the rest of the world looks at how hard we Americans work, and thinks we're crazy. In France, the official work week is 35 hours. And while we have to earn seniority to get a two or three week annual vacation, the typical European vacations for 6 weeks every year!

In a recent essay in Time Magazine, Michael Elliott put it all very simply - "Americans value stuff – SUV's, 7,000 sq. ft. houses, more than they value time. While for Europeans it's the opposite."

There's no question that America is materialistic, especially right here in Southern California. But, at what price? What do we have to sacrifice to achieve the ultimate American lifestyle?

Here's something to think about. In a recent study of 800 college graduates, it was found that those who sought high incomes & career prestige, were twice as likely to classify themselves as unhappy, compared with their classmates who gave a higher priority to friends & a close marriage.

Aizey who ashir? So who is really rich?

We can work 70 hours a week, take one week's vacation a year to try to reach that American Dream of manufactured happiness, or we can count the blessings we already have. That is our choice today. For, today is the day of creation and re-creation. The Book of Life and Death is open before us and we are judged. Who is alive – savoring the delicate and fleeting gift of life and its abundant blessings? And who is already dead – trying to bury one's true self in superficial makeovers and unending work demands on a path to the unattainable?

It is a day of awe, and we must be in awe – of the daily miracles around us, of the people who love us and devote themselves to us, and of the gifts implanted inside of us, some still waiting to be tapped and brought into the world. We are already perfect - in all of our glorious imperfection. The only change we need to make today, is to be ourselves, our best selves – and to inspire others do the same.

Here's a true story about a less than perfect boy. This past year, he inspired quite a lot of conversation in the sport's world. Jake Porter, was a high school senior with a serious mental disability. He was also a member of Northwest High's football team in Ohio. In fact for four years, Jake attended every practice, and suited up in his uniform for every single game. But, throughout his career, he never made it onto the field.

At the end of his last season, Jake's coach wanted to get him in for one play. So, before the game, he talked to the opposing coach and told him about Jake. He said, "If the game's not at stake on the last play, I want him to come in. He can't take a hit or anything."

Well, with 5 seconds left in the game, it turned out the game *was* on the line. Northwest was about to be shut out which, in football, is utter humiliation. For the winning team, no victory can be sweeter. A time out was called, and the two opposing coaches met at midfield. Northwest's coach said he was bringing Jake in, just to take a handoff and kneel down.

But things turned out far differently. Jake came in at tailback. When he got the handoff, instead of blocking and tackling, all the 21 players from both teams made a path. At first, Jake turned to go the wrong way. But the other players pointed him toward the end zone. And, once he figured it out, he took off!

As Jake ran, players from both teams started to run with him, even the players on the sidelines. They cheered him on, step for step, until he reached the end zone. And by then, there wasn't a dry eye on the field or in the stands.

Said the opposing coach, who sacrificed shutting out his rival team: "We didn't do anything special. We were just happy to be a part of that."

In that game, on that day, Jake Porter's gift was revealed. He was loved for who he was – for the authentic, dedicated, football loving boy, who suited up for every game until it was time for his big play. Jake Porter's real gift is that he brings out the best in others.

I once heard it said that "the *meaning* of life is to find our blessings. And the *purpose* of life is to give them away."

Jake found his blessings. Even with his limitations, he knew who he was. And he shared his enthusiasm and love of the game with his teammates for four years. Jake's personality was infectious, and he ignited a flame of goodness in 21 high school football players.

Jake didn't need a makeover. He didn't need someone to go thru his closet, or to give him plastic surgery. Jake was not an "American idol," but he was an American hero to his teammates and coaches.

"Aizey who ashir?" I ask again, "Who is rich?"

Today is our day of decision. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur are our extreme makeover. Yet, they don't call us to become what we're not. They bid us to be who we are.

What are the special talents you possess but have yet to explore? Find them, uncover them, cultivate and nurture them. Take a class, teach a class, learn a hobby, write your novel, get out your telescope, chant torah on our bima!

How do you celebrate each day as a precious gift? Get back your childhood sense of awe and wonder. Take time to do the things you love, and spend time with the people you love. Vacation more, read a book, walk on the beach once a week. Value time more than you value things. The Book of Life is open – choose life.

And finally, take your blessings and share them with other people. No matter who you are, you are a role model and a mentor to someone, even when you don't know it. Be ethical, be passionate, be caring - inspire the best in the people around you.

Take this day to think about you. Not you in comparison to others, but you in comparison to the best you, whom you could be. Consider your gifts, celebrate your life, & stand in awe before the Holy One of Blessing, who makes each one of us holy and blessed!

Zeh ha-yom asah Adonai, nagilah v'nismecha vo – "This is the day God has made, rejoice and be glad in it."

Shana Tov U'metuka – a good and sweet New Year to you and all your loved ones!