

“A Conversation With Myself”

This year a YouTube video went viral called, “A Conversation With My Twelve Year Old Self.” And in case you’re wondering what viral means, apparently it’s been viewed over ten million times since it came out! Back in 1992, Jeremiah McDonald was a clever twelve year-old boy who made a videotape of himself to be viewed one day in the future, by none other than himself. Now, after twenty years, a grown up 32 year-old Jeremiah pulls out the tape and has a dialogue with himself!

Naturally, young Jeremiah has many questions to ask himself in the future. Like, “how are things? And is Molly the dog still alive?” But it’s when older Jeremiah takes over the questioning that the conversation takes a serious turn. “Now what were you doing before you made this video, he asks?” Young Jeremiah proudly holds up a large color poster size illustration of Roy the Rabbit, one of a cast of characters that he loved to draw. Dismay washes over the 32 year-old Jeremiah’s face, as he’s suddenly reminded of his passion for drawing and his intense ambition to be an animator, that somehow fell by the wayside as he grew into manhood. At another point, the back and forth banter grows tense, and teenage Jeremiah shoots back, “What are you blaming me for?” “Because I’m the result of every decision you’ve made,” broods Jeremiah Senior.

Probably not many of us left tapes like these for ourselves, but I am sure that as we look back over the last 10, 20, or 30 years, there are a few choice pieces of advice we wish we could have imparted to ourselves. In the span of 20 years, we change a great deal, sometimes without even realizing it until we consciously look backward and see how far we’ve come. Our sensibilities, our tastes, our interests, our abilities are all different today than they were a decade or two ago.

But, what many of us fail to consider, is that as much as we’ve changed over the past 20 years, we are likely to change just as much in the coming 10 or 20 years. Daniel Gilbert, a Harvard psychologist, says, “Middle-aged people – like me – often look back on our teenage selves with some mixture of amusement and chagrin. What we never seem to realize is that our future selves will look back and think the very same thing about us.”

He calls this the “end of history illusion,” meaning that we think we’ve stopped changing and will pretty much be the same people in 10 years as we are right now. In his research, he found that most people played down the potential for future change. Says Dr. Gilbert, “At every age we think we’re having the last laugh, and at every age we’re wrong.”

Well, we can't change the past, but we certainly can be more thoughtful about our futures. We can realize that, at any age or stage of life, we can and will change. So, the question I would put to us tonight is, if we were making a video for our future selves, what would we say? As we enter this period of reflection, beginning tonight on Erev Rosh Hashanah, this is what we are asked to think about – what kind of critical advice might we give ourselves to help us reach our fullest potential in the years and even decades to come?

Perhaps we can begin with the anniversary just celebrated last week at the Lincoln Memorial. 50 years ago, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., stood before a crowd of 250,000 and gave one of the most famous speeches of all time – I have a dream. It is etched in history and emblazoned in our consciousness as a nation. He dreamed of equality and devoted his life, even sacrificed his life for this dream.

Everyone must have dreams. We don't have to declare them before 250,000 people, and they may not be as grand as Dr. King's, but they are our dreams. Tonight, we are asked to dream.

To recapture dormant and discarded dreams, to create new ones, to live, in the words of Pastor Rick Warren, "a purpose driven life." Ask a retiree and he will tell you; ask a young child and she will say, "to live is to dream."

Harvard Business School Professor Clayton Christensen writes, "It's quite startling that a significant fraction of the 900 students that Harvard Business School draws each year from the world's best, have given little thought to the purpose of their lives."

As my own daughter Sara, the last of our three children to do so, applies to colleges, I see how the pressure has ratcheted up. High school seniors are investing thousands of dollars to eek out higher test scores, they're scrambling to add one more distinction to their already crammed resumes, and paying professionals to help them craft the perfect college essay. With all this pressure, it's no wonder they have little time to dream.

But Professor Christensen cautions, "If they think that they'll have more time and energy to reflect later, they're nuts, because life only gets more demanding: You take on a mortgage; you're working 70 hours a week; you have a spouse and children."

So, I would say to us that, first and foremost, we need to defy the trend. The words of YouTube Jeremiah ring out tonight: we are the result of every decision we've made! If we don't have purpose, a direction, even passion, what will every little decision be based on? We'll just be swept up in the tide of external

demands, drifting into a rudderless future instead of navigating by the star of our true north.

On this Erev Rosh Hashanah, let's dream a little. Let's dream about what we could give to this world, to the people around us, to our families and communities – about the social causes we are passionate about. Let's rekindle old secret dreams and see if they still excite us – special hobbies, interests, sports we used to love to play, evenings out with our spouses and friends, places we always wanted to visit. Let's dream about where our labors could take us, rediscover what we love about what we do as professionals, as parents and grandparents.

In short, let's put together a mission statement, a strategic plan if you will, to guide us toward the next 10 and 20 years of our lives. Because we *will* change – the only question is, how? What do we want to be 5 years from now? What do we want not to be?

It is difficult to embrace change, but if we resist, surely change will overtake us. A great example of this is one of the newest tech phenomena coming to the market this year – Google Glasses. These are essentially computerized glasses. And currently there are about 10,000 “explorers” out there trying them. Using a combination of voice commands and gestures, Google Glass wearers can take pictures, record videos, get directions and place information, search the internet, and send text messages and email.

And this is only the tip of the iceberg. Developers are thinking of countless new applications for these revolutionary glasses. Want to locate a friend who's wandering around the bookstore you've entered? Google Glass will show you the way. Want to know what your street looked like in 1953? Google Glass will display a 60 year-old overlay of the building you're looking at and show you what it used to look like.

Name recognition, face recognition, place and sound recognition – all of it will flash up in your field of vision. We can be like fighter pilots, navigating the earth with streaming data reading out in front of our eyes.

Of course, Google Glass is not without its detractors. Will wearers invade privacy by taking unwanted pictures of us? Some bars and casinos have already banned them. Will they create even more distraction in classrooms, or on the highways?

One Jewish web developer, Barry Schwartz, is just plain excited about the possibilities. He has already designed lots of useful Jewish apps that many of us use on our smartphones. And now he imagines a Glass-enabled Jewish future that provides flashing notifications when it's time to pray or recite Kaddish for a

Yartzeit, or the ability to easily navigate to nearby synagogues or kosher restaurants.

The Chabad rabbi at Stanford University actually sets up a tefillin stand with a twist. As guests put on tefillin they are also given a pair of Google Glasses that display the blessings to recite.

There's no doubt about it. Change is coming. And what can we learn from Google Glass about change? That while it can be strange and even uncomfortable, we have to get ahead of it.

Rather than rejecting Google Glass as a fad or an invasion of our space, let's imagine how we can use this latest technology to not only improve our lives, but improve the world. This is precisely what it means to embrace change – it means being willing to take risk, to use imagination, and take a leap of faith.

As the High Holidays dawn this evening, what can we spark in our imagination? What innovations are waiting for us to embrace? What new things can we try? 20 years ago, Jeremiah made a VHS video for an audience of one. This year, he made a YouTube video for an audience of 10 million. What is the critical change that you will make or embrace in the next 20 years? Dare to dream tonight!

Of course there are many things holding us back. We are overworked, and pressured by high family demands. In fact, a recent study shows that America ranks number 6 among 36 industrialized nations in quality of life. Considering we're the most powerful, influential nation in the world, that is pretty pathetic!

Apparently, we fall behind Sweden, Canada, Norway, and Switzerland, all of which have better qualities of life. And to what do we attribute our poor showing? It's not lack of wealth. In income we actually scored high, with a 10 out of 10. So, perhaps it's our work-life balance that's responsible. After all, how did we make all that money if not by working harder than the average country?

But not so! Believe it or not, Australians reported working harder than Americans.

What Megan Daum, who presented this study in the L.A. Times, suggests is that we Americans read the survey altogether differently from others. For Americans, quality of life means happiness, as in: "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," which we equate with self-gratification and personal reward. Whereas, the rest of the world understands quality of life as something else. Not as happiness, per se, but as life satisfaction and contentedness.

And there is a huge difference between these two. We can spend a lifetime pursuing happiness, but it will usually elude us, for it is momentary at best. But

contentedness is always within our grasp – to be happy with who we are, with what we possess, with what we are accomplishing, with whom we are in loving relationship, with what we are able to give to the world. “*Azey who ashir? Ha-sameach b’chelko.*” “Who is rich,” ask our rabbis? “The one who rejoices in his or her portion.”

This was the lesson that 32 year-old Jeremiah McDonald was shocked to learn from his 12 year-old self, when he rediscovered a passionate, playful, artistic, hopeful kid. How did he lose that? How did he forget those parts of himself? How did he lose hold of his optimistic, contented demeanor?

Tonight, we are each asked to begin that conversation with ourselves. We are asked to allow the 12 year-old within us speak to our present and future selves, to let the dialogue run free and see what our past, present, and future have to say to one another. Knowing that we will change, what do we want that change in ourselves to look like?

In the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, what are the dreams we need to bring back into focus, and the ambitions we have for ourselves and the world? They don’t have to stay locked in the videotapes of our past, but can be handed off to the Google Glass of the future. Which leads us to ask, what risks and new adventures can we resolve to take this year? Innovation may be daunting, but do we want our inner Jeremiah to reprimand us with, “I’m the result of every decision you’ve made?” And while we set our sights on these ambitions, let’s also remember the difference between pursuit of happiness and life satisfaction.

It’s in that regard, that I leave you with this final thought. My teacher of blessed memory, Rabbi David Hartman, brings the Talmud’s teaching, that after every meal we are commanded to say a blessing. And even when we eat only *k’zeit* – as little as an olive – we are still to say the same blessing. Reb Dovid teaches that this is because Jews give thanks, even when we’re still hungry. Why? Because we are happy with small achievements.

We don’t have to love life because it is perfect, he says. But rather, we love life for what it is, and for the dream of what it one day could be. To this ideal, we dedicate ourselves this evening. Shana Tova!