

SHEMINI ATZERET
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In honor of this Yom Kippur, Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks of London, England issued a new pamphlet entitled "*Letters to the Next Generation 2.*" Like last year, he wrote a letter to two mythical college students, Ruth and Michael, who may have questions about the efficacy of Jewish life and ritual, concerns about the Jewish future and Jewish identity, questions about anti-Semitism and Israel and queries about the meaning of life. In eighteen short letters he frames questions and then responds to them in kind. He attempts to teach them, as well as people of their generation in this reflection on Jewish life, the great lessons of Judaism and of their generation's responsibility of being links in the chain of this great tradition.

In the last letter, Ruth and Michael ask the Chief Rabbi: "What is your message to us in the year to come?" Rabbi Sacks responds: "I have seen people achieve great success and yet end their lives sad and lonely because they thought about themselves and never really cared for others. I have seen people with great talent under-achieve because they never fully realized that character matters more than talent, and wisdom more than being clever. I have seen people accumulate great wealth without finding happiness because they forgot that wealth is only a means, not an end. Happiness is made by the good we do, the relationships we form and the extent to which we enhance the lives of others."

On Shabbat Hol Hamoed Sukkot we read, the Book of Kohelet, Ecclesiastes. Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book "*When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*" calls this the most dangerous book in the Bible. Ecclesiastes looks at life and attempts to find some meaning in it. We follow his search as he finds very little to life beyond a feeling of vanity and disappointment. According to Rabbi Kushner, Ecclesiastes asks the following question: "What makes my life matter? What makes it more than a passing phenomenon, not worth noticing while I am alive and destined to be forgotten as soon as I am dead?"

Ecclesiastes looks to pleasure, wisdom, philosophy, piety, wealth, learning and organized religion for answers, but to no avail. According to Kushner his answer ultimately is: "I can't come up with an answer, but I instinctively feel that human life has to be more than mere biological existence. When I am happy at my work or with my family, when I love or am loved, when I am generous or thoughtful, I feel that something more significant than just being alive is going on. I feel human, and that feeling is more persuasive than logic or philosophy."

It is a troubling and challenging book, one that does not give easy answers. I am not sure that even Ecclesiastes would be pleased with the answer that Rabbi Kushner believes he reads in the book. However, we can agree with Rabbi Sacks that the meaning of life, as Kushner suggests Ecclesiastes learned, is evaluated by the good we do, the

relationships we form and to the extent that we enhance the lives of others. This is a wonderful formula which can lead us to wonderful moments of meaning in life.

Much has been written in the last two weeks about the life of Steve Jobs. There are those who have equated him with Albert Einstein and Thomas Edison. Clearly, the new technology that he brought to our society has changed our lives dramatically. His was a life that has left behind a remarkable legacy, as his name will forever be enshrined on the list of great American inventors.

Yet, what I found most significant is that many news stories attempted to understand this private and complex human being. Since he did not give many interviews, many of them referred to his commencement address at Stanford University in 2005. There he attempted to teach the graduates about life based upon his own experiences. He, himself, dropped out of Reed College and felt that it was with a bit of serendipity and much moxy that he and his partner, Steve Wozniak, introduced the first MacIntosh computer. From that early part of his life he suggests to the graduates: “You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something – your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever.”

His was a life in which there were great successes and great failures. He was, after all, fired from Apple and it was only then that he became involved with Pixar, which created the world’s first computer-animated feature film, Toy Story. He later returned to Apple and led the company to even greater success. He told the graduates: “Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking. Don’t settle. As with all matters of the heart, you’ll know when you find it.”

Finally, he tells the graduates that he had faced death in the face after he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He was fortunate that surgery allowed him to live another six years. He feels that coming face-to-face with death taught him something that he wanted to share with the graduates. He told them: “No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of Life... Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life... Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition.”

These statements by Steve Jobs, though not a philosopher himself, are good answers to the questions of Ecclesiastes. What is the meaning of life? Jobs tells us that we should have faith in ourselves, learn what success is all about, set our goals high and attempt to live out our dreams. They are thoughtful answers to the ultimate questions of what is the meaning of life.

On September 18, 2007, Randy Pausch, delivered the last lecture at Carnegie Mellon University. He was a professor of computer science and had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In his lecture, he concentrated on what was really important in life to him and what he wanted to convey to his students. He died on August 25, 2008. By that time there were over 6 million views on You Tube of his last lecture and his book on the same subject became a best seller. He told his audience that after being diagnosed with terminal cancer, he understood that he had only limited time on earth. "All right," he said, "that is what it is. We can't change it. We just have to decide how we will respond. We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand."

This is ultimately the question of Ecclesiastes once more. If that is all there is, then what good is life and our living it. Pausch suggests that life itself can be worthwhile if we follow certain values. He told his audience to express gratitude and find the best in everybody. He instructed them to continue living every day until the day that you die. He told his audience: "It's not about how you achieve your dreams, it's about how you lead your life. If you lead your life the right way, the karma will take care of itself. The dreams will come to you." As he approached death he taught many of us how to live, what goals to strive for and how to serve as a lasting inspiration for those who outlive us.

It is rather interesting that on Sukkot, the Season of our Rejoicing, the scroll that is selected to be read is the Book of Kohelet, the most dangerous and cynical of all books. On Sukkot we are grateful for nature's harvest, for the beauty that is around us, for the friendships in our community and for the security that we have in living in permanent houses all year long, except for the seven days when we go outside into these flimsy huts. According to Rabbi Kushner: "It is a time to enjoy happiness with those we love and to realize that we are at a time in our lives when enjoying today means more than worrying about tomorrow. It is a time to celebrate the fact that we have finally learned what life is about and how to make the most of it."

On Sukkot when we are taught that we should enjoy life, we should profess a sense of gratitude to God for the gifts that we possess and make the most of those gifts. The words of Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the commencement address of Steve Jobs, the last lecture of Randy Pausch, and the interpretations on the Book of Ecclesiastes by Rabbi Harold Kushner, should impress upon us to look at our lives, our values and our goals, to show gratitude for the gifts that we have received and to venture into the future with hope, faith and optimism. As we prepare to recite our Yizkor memorial prayer when we recall the memory of our loved ones let us learn to make the most of our lives, to establish worthy goals, to work towards enhancing the relationships that we have, and to make our individual impact upon our world.