

Dedication: A Path to a Meaningful Life and A Better Society

YK Sermon 5784 - Rabbi Michael Schwab (Written for Speaking)

In the late 1800s, the famous inventor, Thomas Edison, was working on developing a practical and long-lasting electric light bulb. The task was *extremely* challenging, and Edison faced *numerous* setbacks during his experiments. One day, a young journalist approached Edison and asked him, "Mr. Edison, how does it feel to have **failed** a thousand times in your attempts to create the electric light bulb?" Edison responded with a smile, "Young man, I haven't *failed* a thousand times. I have actually *successfully* discovered a thousand ways that **won't** work!"

As you can see from his attitude, Edison took difficulties and criticism in stride and remained **dedicated** to his goal. Therefore, he was able to turn *failures* into valuable learning experiences, remaining *committed* to his dream of creating the *first* electric light bulb. And as you know, Edison's dedication paid off: in 1879, he successfully developed such a bulb, revolutionizing the way people lived and worked. Edison's *unwavering* commitment, day after day, and his refusal to give up, despite all obstacles, not only led to one of the most significant inventions in history, but also set an example for generations to come about the power of **true dedication**. Edison's story reminds us *today* that committing to a goal, **or** to a set of *values*, **or** to a desired *vision*, even in the face of difficulty, can result in extraordinary achievement and a sense of great fulfillment.

On Rosh Hashana I spoke to you about the critical importance of *inspiration* - of being open to the amazement in the world, the blessings that surround us, and the incredible daily heroism of other people, like the Hoyts, that amazing father and son duo. And I shared the need to sometimes *remove* ourselves from our routine, to take leave, to encounter new experiences that can galvanize us to change, grow and deepen our fulfillment with life.

Today, I want to share with you how to *harness* that power of inspiration, so that we can *all* fulfill the great aspirations of these important holidays, in making lasting positive change in ourselves and

in the world. For to achieve *this* lofty goal, we need *more* than inspiration, we also need to embrace the value of **dedication**.

Last week, I taught you that the great Rav Kook, first Chief Rabbi of Israel and renowned thinker, wrote that there are *two* kinds of *teshuvah*, two methods for making positive change in our lives. The first was *Pitumit*, which I dubbed as “inspirational change” and which was the focus of *that* sermon. Today, I want to teach you the *second* method, what Kook calls *Dargit*, or gradual change. Kook describes this method of achieving *teshuvah* as an *incremental* process that one lives daily in order to [quote] “grow more worthy until he comes to a high level of refinement and rectification”. For Kook, it is through the *daily* process of commitment that the rubber meets the road.

To illustrate, let’s think about each of us today. Perhaps you have been inspired during the holiday thus far and, through your reflections, have identified an aspect of your character, or your life, that you wish to change. For example, you realize that you don’t share enough with the people in your life how much you love them. Perhaps you can even see what step one in the process to change that reality might look like. For example, make a *list* of those people to whom you want to express your love more often. The question is: what happens *tomorrow*, the next day, and the day after that? Will your resolve and enthusiasm fade? Will you indeed call or write the people on the list? Will you do it regularly moving forward or at least again next year? Kook teaches that it is the incremental change, one small step at a time, that occurs through our *daily* dedication and commitment *following* inspiration, that allows us to take the change we *see* for ourselves, or our society, and make it *real*. In our example, this might mean putting the people you wish to call, in your calendar at a specific time, with all the information needed to make it happen. And then ask someone to hold you accountable. And perhaps the first year you start with one or two people and add more when you have developed and strengthened the habit. And if you falter, you don’t give up on the entire project from a failure or two. Like Edison with his lightbulb, like Moses leading our ancestors through many setbacks for *over forty years* in the wilderness, *daily dedication* to a goal or vision, sometimes over lengthy stretches of times, even in the face of failures, is what helps us reach the finish line we desire to cross.

Perhaps that is why the rabbis instituted different Shofar blasts. The shofar is our iconic way of calling us to do *teshuvah*, to embark on this process of change and growth. The staccato nine-note *Teruah* implies *urgency* and *quick movement*, while, on the other end, we *conclude* Yom Kippur with the *long* solid *tekiah gedolah*, indicating the steady, lasting, *committed* work of change that we need to internalize and take with us once the holiday ends and the year begins in earnest.

Science tells us that indeed we *are* hardwired for both kinds of change. As Daniel Kahneman, noted Psychologist and author of *Thinking Fast and Slow*, teaches, our brains are primed to both react quickly and strongly to *immediate* circumstances, as with inspiration, and to step back and use a more strategic approach that requires: thought, planning, and long-term **dedication**.

In fact, some of the most famous creatives of all time, those one might *think* worked on inspiration alone, *lived* the advice of pairing dedication to inspiration, their whole lives. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes in a *wonderful* article on the subject, the renowned composer, Beethoven, rose *each and every* morning at dawn. He would then sit at his desk and compose until 2:00 p.m. or 3:00 p.m. Subsequently, he would go for a long walk, *taking with him* a pencil and some sheets of music paper to record any ideas that came to him on the way. Each night after supper he would have a beer, smoke a pipe, and go to bed early, 10:00 p.m. at the latest. He did this *every* day and through his *dedication* and hard work, gave us the gift of his many beautiful compositions that so many still enjoy now.

Bill Gates, known to many as one of the most innovative, cutting edge computer scientists, entrepreneurs and giants of business, dedicated *himself* to computer programming from the early age of 12. Even once he achieved great success, his employees reflected that twelve hour work days and 7 day work weeks were the *norm* for him. As business writer, Dupinder Singh, wrote, “Success is not an accident. It’s a *deliberate, methodical* process that requires *relentless* hard work, unwavering **dedication**, and a **commitment** to excellence . . . [Gate’s] *unyielding dedication* has been the bedrock of his success, enabling him to innovate and lead in the cutthroat tech industry.”

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reflected, “these details, together with more than 150 other examples drawn from the great philosophers, artists, composers, and writers come from a book by Mason Currey entitled *Daily Rituals: How Great Minds Make Time, Find Inspiration, and Get to Work*. The book’s point is simple. Most creative people have daily rituals [to which they are committed]. These form the soil in which the seeds of their *invention* grow. . . . Note the paradox. These were all innovators, pioneers, ground-breakers, trail-blazers, who formulated *new* ideas, originated *new* forms of expression, did things no one had done before in quite that way. They broke the mould. . . .” *Yet*, their *daily lives* were built around *commitment* and their daily actions reflected their on-going *dedication* to their life goals. Why is this important? As Sacks writes, “The paradigm-shifting scientific discovery, the path-breaking research, the wildly successful new product, the brilliant novel, the award-winning film, are almost always the result of many years of long hours and attention to detail.” Creating something new, or making a major change in our lives, or trying to improve society, all involve hard work and *sustained commitment*. There is no other way. To accomplish important goals, actualize our ideals, or realize our visions, *at some point* we need to transition from inspiration to *dedication*.

It is not a coincidence that the ancient Hebrew word for daily work, *avodah*, is *also* the word that means “serving God”, or worship. As Sacks says, “What applies in the arts, sciences, business, and industry, applies *equally* to the life of the spirit. Achieving *any* form of spiritual growth requires sustained effort and daily rituals.” Inspiration and dedication go hand in hand. Hence the remarkable passage in the Mishnah in which various Sages put forward their idea of *klal gadol baTorah*, “the greatest (inspirational) principle of the Torah.” In this teaching, different sages quoted famous verses such as, “And Gd made humankind in the image of Gd”, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one”, and “Love your neighbor as yourself”. All of these are *profound* concepts, worthy ideals, and sourced from well-known verses. Interestingly though, Ben Pazzi said that the great principle of the Torah comes from a verse in Exodus, which states: “One sheep shall be

offered in the morning, and a second in the afternoon”. (pause) That certainly doesn’t sound as profound as the others! Amazingly, the passage in the Mishnah concludes: “The law follows **Ben Pazzi.**”!

The meaning of Ben Pazzi’s statement is powerful and clear: as Sacks teaches, all the high ideals in the world – being made in God’s image, belief in God’s unity, and even the love of a neighbor, “count for little until they are turned into habits of action that become habits of the heart. We can all recall moments of insight when we had a great idea, a transformative thought, the glimpse of a project that could change our lives. A day, a week, or a year later, the thought has been forgotten or become a distant memory, at best a *might-have-been*. The people who change the world, whether in small or epic ways, are those who turn peak experiences into daily routines, who know that the details matter, and who have developed the discipline of hard work, *sustained over time.*” In other words, change makers are those who understand the power of *dedication*.

This principle is one of Judaism’s great contributions to how we can more successfully lead our lives in the day to day: *mitzvot*, Jewish standards for living, take our high ideals and exalted visions –like loving our neighbor – and turn them into patterns of behavior that are enacted in our *everyday* lives. *Halacha* (Jewish law), but more literally meaning “the path”, involves a set of prescribed routines that – like those of the great creative minds – can reconfigure the brain, giving discipline to our lives and changing the way we feel, think, and act over time in surprising and positive ways.

Judaism, and its emphasis on law, must *seem* to many of us at various moments as prosaic, repetitive, or obsessed with details. Yet, the dedication shown through such characteristics is, Sacks says, “precisely what writing the novel, composing the symphony, directing the film, perfecting the killer app, raising kids, or building a billion-dollar business *is*, a good deal of the time”. To *reach* the meaningful ideal, it is usually a matter of *dedication*, commitment, hard work, focused attention, and daily rituals or routines. “That is where all *sustainable* greatness comes from”.

In contemporary times we have developed a certain view of religious experience that can be misleading and even harmful: that spirituality is defined by what overwhelms you in a moment, or when something happens *to* you, externally. You climb a mountain peak and look down. You are amazed. You are miraculously saved from danger and you are moved. You witness an extraordinary feat. And you are transformed. When open to their power, those experiences *can* indeed be impactful and inspirational and *do* have their place in spirituality, as I shared on Rosh Hashanah.

But this type of spirituality alone has serious limitations. For a moving *experience* is just that - an experience. It *can* motivate us. It *can* serve as a Northstar in our consciousness. *But*, because experiences are unique events, they cannot be tangibly part of our *everyday* lives, unless we do something to continually make them so. They are not woven *permanently* into the texture of our character, *unless we dedicate* ourselves to making that happen. As Sacks so poetically wrote, “Judaism is about changing **us** so that we become creative artists whose greatest creation -- is our own life.” And doing so requires dedication and daily rituals to turn our aspirations into reality: like regular prayer, blessing the food we eat, the way we behave at work or in the home, sustained commitment to our goals, and an embrace of our sacred rituals and traditions, some of which we are observing right now.

For the *science minded* amongst us, I learned that these rituals and daily commitments *indeed* have a measurable effect on our brain. According to a 2019 Harvard Review of Psy-chiatry study, we now know through PET and fMRI scans that repeated spiritual exercise does indeed change the pattern of our brain waves. It gives us inner resilience. It makes us more grateful. It gives us a sense of basic trust in the source of our being. It shapes our identity, the way we act, and talk, and think. As Sacks notes, “Ritual is to spiritual greatness what practice is to a tennis player, daily writing disciplines are to a novelist, and reading company accounts are to Warren Buffett. They are the precondition of high achievement”. As our tradition tells us, serving God is *avodah*, which means hard work, and so is anything worthwhile, like making positive change. And so with *Teshuvah Dargit* -- gradual,

daily, commitment and dedication bring both results and fulfillment that are hard to achieve in any other way.

There was a wonderful book published in 2021, entitled *Dedicated*, which compellingly makes the *contemporary* case for choosing a life defined by commitment. The author, Pete Davis, argues that we currently live in a world of *infinite browsing* and *endless choices*. So we spend most of our time cycling through options, always assuming there is something more or better around the corner. Therefore, we *rarely* fully commit to a choice, always wanting to “keep our options open”. But he argues that without *dedication* it is hard to delve deeply into *anything*, or to find *any* sense of personal fulfillment. Therefore, for many, *non-commitment* results in feelings of emptiness, dissatisfaction and being adrift. Consequently, he concludes that it is *imperative* for us as individuals, and as a contemporary society, to rediscover our ability to dedicate ourselves to meaningful values, relationships, and projects. As he wrote, “I wrote this book because . . . the stakes are *high*. On a personal level they are high because browsing forever can lead to great despair, while dedication can lead to great joy. But the stakes are high on a *societal* level too. There are so many big problems to solve . . . and breaches to repair in the world today. And I believe that the biggest barrier to taking on *any* of these challenges is that there are simply not enough people *dedicated to tackling them*. . . commitment is the first step towards changing the world - and our *fears* of commitment are standing in the way of jumping in”.

He further writes, “To commit is to be willing to try something out for a long time, to embody it and to see what happens . . . commitment is about letting belief organically grow within us. As our commitment deepens we slowly develop a clearer understanding of what is good, beautiful and true. . . I *love* that the word dedicate has two meanings: First it means ‘to make something holy’, as in dedicating a memorial. But it also means ‘to stick to something for a long time’. I don’t think this is a coincidence: We’re doing something holy when we choose to commit to something”.

I couldn't agree more! And obviously *what* we choose to commit to, matters greatly. Our dedication should be to that which is sacred, good and constructive. That is the beauty of dedication in the context of Judaism. We have a several thousand year old history of a tradition that has bequeathed to us not only incredibly well-thought out values and not only a great system, *Halakha*, of making those values tangible in our lives. But Judaism has *also* gifted us a legacy of *prioritizing* dynamic discussion and debate about what is right and what is important that encourages us to *continually* refine and keep as center-focus what is *good* in the world.

So I ask, to what will *you* dedicate *yourself* this year? To what will *you* commit? Following the model of *teshuvah dargit*, gradual transformation, perhaps you start small. Shabbat dinner at least every month? Building a sukkah this year, or at least eating a meal in one? Choosing one Social Action project this coming year, or adding one more? Attending one, or one more, of the classes we offer in the upcoming season? Giving 2% *more* Tzedakah? Finding a few more hours to volunteer your time for a cause? Schedule in your calendar to tell your family members before each holiday how much you love them and appreciate them? Whatever worthy projects, relationships, or actions you are *inspired* to do, make the choice to embrace them and *dedicate* yourself to seeing them through, step by step, day by day.

I leave you with one last personal story. In between Junior and Senior year of college I staffed a United Synagogue Youth Trip to Poland and Israel. For me it was *inspirational* - I completely fell in love with studying Jewish text, celebrating Shabbat with lots of *ruach* and singing, and with being a part of *leading* a Jewish community. When I returned, I made a *commitment* - that I would study Jewish text every weekday possible. So, I reached out to the Hillel rabbi, and a friend with whom I wanted to study, and they agreed to meet me at the Hillel each morning (I brought the kosher bagels and coffee). And we studied Mishnah together just about every day of the week for that entire year. The fulfillment I received from that dedication played a *large* role in my trajectory to not only *becoming* a rabbi, but to *loving* becoming a rabbi.

For me, the math formula of inspiration plus dedication changed my life in beautiful ways.

Inspiration is surely out there, at every turn if we keep our eyes and hearts open to it. And using role models like Thomas Edison, Beethoven, Bill Gates, Moses, Ben Pazzi and Rabbi Sacks as our guides, we then need to find a way to turn our vision, our goals, and our values into *reality* through defining ourselves by our *daily* commitments and by our *long-term* dedication. *Today*, on Yom Kippur we internalize Rav Kook's teaching about *Teshuvah Dargit*, the importance of gradual, incremental change made day by day, week by week, through discipline, routines, rituals, and dedication. We embody the long *tekiah gedolah* that ends this sacred holiday and reminds us to *sustain* our commitments over time. Today we see the wisdom of following the path, *halachah*, to help us reconfigure our brains to be happier, more resilient, more successful, wiser, more fulfilled -- *better* -- human beings. That is my blessing for us all!! *Gmar Hatimah Tovah* - May we be sealed, and seal for ourselves, a year of being dedicated to what truly matters most!
Ken Yehi Ratzon!