

Rosh Hashanah 5768
2007
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas
Life Lists

Have you created your life list yet?

What is a life list you ask? It's only one of the hottest crazes in contemporary America. I mean every one is doing it. And I thought you here on the North Shore of Long Island were up on all the latest fashions.

A Life list is a list of the things you'd like to do, things you feel you need to do, before you die. So when Ellen DeGeneris asked celebrity guests to share their life lists on her talk show, Orlando Bloom said that he wanted to learn to play the bongos; Beyoncé Knowles promised to take ballet lessons.

Life lists are everywhere. They were recently featured on NPR's popular show "Talk of the Nation" – they are the subject of books – like Patricia Schultz's bestseller: 1,000 Places to See Before You Die. You can see them featured in ad campaigns like the one for Visa credit cards which is built around a checklist called: "Things to Do While You're Alive" (presumably that cost money).

And Life Lists are about to become even bigger when the highly anticipated film: "The Bucket List" is released in a few months. This movie, directed by Rob Reiner and starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman is about two terminally ill patients who have little in common except for the fact that they end up in the same hospital room. They decide that they have things they want to do, before they "kick the bucket" and embark on a road trip with a list of things (their bucket list) they want to do before they die.

Life Lists are, not surprisingly, all over the Internet with dozens of web sites dedicated to them- like 43Things.com that has enrolled 1.2 million members—and even ranks the results. In case you are interested, sky diving ranks 24th in popularity; losing weight, unsurprisingly, is first.

So what would you put on your life list? To get a feel for this, I read through a few on the internet.

Sarah Fisher in London has the following on her list of 50 things that she wants to do before she dies: visit the Australia zoo, get a tattoo marking something significant in my life, travel across the Great Wall of China, write my own biography, have a giant pillow fight and give myself a haircut while I am drunk.

Meghan Moore of Louisiana wants to: drive a tank, fly a glider, go canoeing, try bungee jumping, and learn to juggle.

What worries me about all these "life lists" is that they seem to have one thing in common – the things that are on all these to-do lists are about personal fulfillment, self indulgence and doing things for yourself.

Don't get me wrong – I am all for climbing the Great Wall of China and I hope you all have an opportunity to bungee jump before you die – if that is what turns you on – I am just wondering if these things are enough to make your journey here on this planet worthwhile.

For the last 4000 years we Jews have been making our own life-lists. We just called them *mitzvot*. And what makes them remarkably different from the life lists I see today is that they are not, our to-do list, but God's to-do list. And they are based on an assumption that some of the most fulfilling things we do in life are the things we do for others rather than for ourselves.

Now I know that this is going to be a tough sell. Religion makes demands on us: In Buddhism you are asked to meditate, in Islam you are asked to submit, in Christianity you are asked to accept a savior, in Judaism you are asked to do *mitzvot* – God’s work on earth.

With so little time and so much to do – why should we waste any of it doing things for someone else – let alone God? I mean, really, there are canoes to be rowed and bungees to be jumped. With seventy-nine million baby-boomers reaching that point in life when time seems too short I expect you to make room for God’s to do list – when you haven’t even started writing your own?

When I was growing up as a kid in Cincinnati, Ohio, I remember that there was a custom that the night before Halloween was UNICEF night. We used to go from house to house, just as one did on Halloween, but on UNICEF night, instead of collecting stuff for yourself, you were given cardboard containers that were distributed by our schools and expected to collect money for UNICEF. In retrospect it was a nice idea, teaching us that before you stuffed yourself, you expressed a concern for others. It also had a side benefit. In the Midwest (I don’t know about New York customs of those bygone days) but in the Midwest, the night before Halloween was also known as, mischief night, or Hell night, when kids went out soaping up peoples car windows, toilet papering trees and other acts of wanton destruction – so UNICEF night also became a clever way to try and redirect our energies.

I remember one particular year when I was in 6th grade – and an older 7th grader was teaching me the ropes of UNICEF night as he instructed me – “See that thing on the side of the door? That means Jews live there – and they never say, “no” on UNICEF night. Sometimes, when it is getting late” he confided in me, “I just skip all the homes that don’t have those things and just go to the Jewish houses – maximizes my time!” Clearly, he didn’t know that I was Jewish – having the name Alan Lucas was at times definitely a benefit growing up in Cincinnati, Ohio – even if it later raised some eyebrows in New York when I introduced myself as RABBI Alan Lucas. But, I remember my reaction – I was proud that this kid – who clearly knew nothing about *mezuzot* and little more about Jews – associated Jews with generosity and charitable giving. For this kid, a mezuzah meant that charitable people lived here. What does a mezuzah mean to you?

How many of you have a mezuzah on the doors of your houses? Great! Now, a harder question: Why? Why did you put it there?

Some of you, but I am not sure how many of you, might respond: “Well rabbi, you should know that two times a day we recite the *Shma* prayer which quotes Deuteronomy chapter 6 where it explicitly states: “And these words, which I command you this day, you shall take to heart. Teach them to your children; recite them at home and away, day and night. Bind them as a sign upon your hand and as a reminder above your eyes – **and inscribe them upon the doorposts of your homes and upon your gates!**”

“Yes rabbi, I have a mezuzah on the doorpost of *my* house because it is a *mitzvah!* And as a good Jew I try and observe *all* of the *mitzvot* written in the Torah.” Not the answer you would have given? A rabbi can dream can’t he?

I have here in my hand a sheet of paper. At the top it states: “We the members of Temple Beth Sholom, Roslyn Heights, New York are committed to and observe the following mitzvot: And then there sheet is numbered 1-10. Do you think we could come up with 10 *mitzvot* that we all are committed to?

This exercise is the result of a conversation I had with an Adult Education class recently. I posed the following query. If I wanted – ala Martin Luther – to post a declaration on the doors of our beloved Temple Beth Sholom on Rosh Hashanah that would list all of the *mitzvot* that this congregation could collectively commit itself to – which ones do you think we could we agree upon? If I wanted to tack to the doors of this remarkable congregation a

declaration that began: “All who enter these doors believe in, agree to and observe the following mitzvot:” could we come up with a list of 10 that every single person sitting in this sanctuary could agree to; a list that would be sufficiently inclusive so as not to exclude any one of you?

My first thought was to just to post the Ten Commandments! What could be more Jewish than the Ten Commandments, the world’s first life list? But I quickly realized that wouldn’t do it. Honor your father and mother – well that might make our list –but what about: Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy? I don’t think so, or: Don’t covet? Maybe we should start with more modest ambitions.

There are thousands of people in our synagogue today. And each and every one of you made a conscious decision to be here. Go to shul on Rosh Hashanah – check. Why? You could have been out bungee jumping and yet, you chose to be here. Why?

A hundred years ago, had I surveyed a congregation as to why they were in shul on Rosh Hashanah – almost everyone might have looked at me strangely and said something to the effect of – “What kind of a question is that? It’s Rosh Hashanah! Where else should a Jew be but in shul?” And had I pressed them for an answer, a hundred years ago, I suspect there would not have been a wide variety of responses and that their answers would have ultimately boiled down to variations on one, two, or maybe three themes. But, such is not the case today.

The answer to the question: why are you here? – is no longer self-evident, and your motivations for being here, I suspect are varied, complicated and multi-dimensional. What is more self-evident are the excuses one could use for *not* being here. It is expensive to be a member of a shul these days. It is crowded on the High Holy Days and a hassle to find a place to sit. The noise and the hub-bub make it hard to find a quiet place to carve out a moment for spiritual contemplation and worship. The service is long – way too long (even for those who are used to long services). The Hebrew is strange and hard – (even for those who know Hebrew). I could go on – but I fear I am making too good of an argument.

But the truth is you don’t need me to make this case – you know the reasons for *not* coming better than I – yet, you are here, and although I for one am glad that you are, – my question remains: why?

A hundred years ago, your great grandfather might have answered: “I am here because this is where God wants me to be; I keep kosher because God wants me to. That is what it means to be a Jew – to strive to observe the *mitzvot* of God – to try and do what God wants us to do.” But, your great grandfather no longer sits in my shul, you do. And today I stand before a congregation of Jews who ask: What does it mean to say – “God wants”? And how do you know what God wants? And what about those of you who don’t even think in terms of what God wants – why should being in shul on Rosh Hashanah be on your life list?

The new Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Professor Arnie Eisen – at whose inauguration as the seventh chancellor in the 111 year history of the Seminary, I was pleased to attend just last week and on whose Rabbinic Cabinet I am proud to serve – Professor Eisen has issued a challenge to engage all Conservative Jews in a discussion on *mitzvah* and its meaning for our lives. To those of you who are not sure why you are here today, to those of you who are wrestling with the place of Judaism in your over-stressed, over-packed lives this is a conversation we need to have. And to those of you who *are* involved and who do find great meaning in this place and that for which it stands, we too need to have this conversation, as we too need to explore the contours and dimensions of the faith that motivates you and inspires you.

As a member of the Chancellor’s Rabbinic Cabinet – we are one of nine congregations in North America that has been challenged to begin this conversation. We will have a series of

programs and classes that will be held this year to enable this conversation –and it will be facilitated by the faculty and staff at the Jewish Theological Seminary. We will join together with these eight other congregations across the country and share in video conference dialogue with Chancellor Eisen himself. We will be the pilot of a program that will be evaluated and then rolled out to the rest of the Conservative Movement next year based on our experience. At that time the conversation will also be expanded to include the various arms of our Movement – to our men’s clubs and women’s leagues to our Ramah camps and Schechter schools and to USY. Chancellor Eisen believes that such a discussion is of vital importance to our movement, to the Jewish people and in its broadest sense – to all thoughtful human beings.

We here at TBS are going to begin this conversation with our enormously successful JTS Adult Learning class. The goal is to expand this class to 36 - our *lamed vavnicks*. The hope is to have a representative group—men and women, members from our active core, from the ranks of our somewhat involved and most challenging to get participation from a few of you who up till now have been uninvolved. There will be representatives of the under 40 crowd, the 40’s and 50’s crowd and those over 60. We hope to have singles, married with no children, parents from our Early Childhood program, our Religious School, MBS High School and our Schechter parents as well as empty-nesters, grandparents, the never married, widowed and divorced. In short we hope to have a diverse group that will be representative of the thousands who sit here today. If you are not invited to be a part of this initial conversation, don’t worry because over the year and into next year we will be expanding this program and reaching out to all corners of our congregation.

There are those who are quick to criticize, we Conservative Jews, as unobservant and uncaring. They say we are too self-indulgent and self absorbed to embrace a notion of mitzvah. I disagree. I think there is an enormous amount of caring and an enormous amount of observance and vibrancy and vitality in our Movement, I see it every day.

The genius in Chancellor Eisen’s challenge is that this is going to be a conversation unlike any we have ever had. We will not begin with me telling you what I think you should do. We will not begin with the Chancellor telling you what Conservative Jews believe or what Conservative Judaism means. In the course of this conversation the rabbi, or the chancellor or the Movement is not going to tell you what mitzvah means or should mean. Rather we will begin from the other direction – by asking you, our thoughtful Conservative Jews to reflect carefully and speak honestly about a subject that I believe is close to your hearts and crucial to our communities and our future. It is our belief – that by listening and talking rather than preaching and lecturing – we will discover more commitment, individually and collectively, than we had ever imagined. And I believe we will be surprised at the consensus that will emerge as our conversation advances. I am not sure that it will be as hard to fill that TBS life list – our mitzvah list as we thought it might be.

Came to shul on Rosh Hashanah – check

Placed a mezuzah on the door of my home – check

If these things seem a little strange, if your being here today feels a little strange – that’s ok – because it is a little strange – in that it runs contrary to the zeitgeist of our times. We do live in a self indulgent, self absorbed society that focuses on personal fulfillment. We live in an age that encourages us to do what we want to do, when we want to do it – and to do it for ourselves. But the truth is that many of you – most of you, know that there is more to life than that.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, one of my favorite rabbis, served a congregation in Massachusetts for many years. He tried to explain how love can be a form of mitzvah and

doing for others can be the highest form of fulfillment with the following episode from his own life. He recalls when his wife Karen was pregnant with their second child.

And as pregnant women sometimes do, Karen woke him up in the middle of the night and told him she couldn't sleep – in part because she had developed a craving – for a Hershey's chocolate bar with almonds.

As Rabbi Kushner tells the story, "She'd been schlepping this baby around in her belly, and I was getting off easy, so I figured it was the least I could do. Before she completed enunciating her request, I said, "Don't worry about a thing, honey." I put my Levi's on over my pajamas, threw on a sweatshirt, snow galoshes, and my down parka, hood, gloves and muffler. I ran down the few flights of steps to the car and to my chagrin, saw there were about three inches of wet sloppy snow all over the car. I cleaned it off, started the car, and then had this horrifying realization—I had no idea where I was going to find a store open in the middle of the night.

I drove up Route 20 and remembered the Holiday Inn out on Route 495 had a candy machine.

I can still picture the night clerk watching this car skid to a stop in a snowstorm, a man runs in, waves, pumps quarters into the candy machine, grabs a handful of candy bars, runs back to the car, and drives off into the blizzard. I got home and gave my wife the candy bars.

For about an hour on a wintry night, I, Lawrence Kushner, who normally has a very well-developed ego, did not have an ego. Instead, I was a servant of Karen Kushner's ego. I did not stay in a warm bed. I drove around looking for candy bars. And here's the crazy part. (as if running around in a snow storm for a candy bar is not crazy enough!)

Doing what my lover wanted, made me happier than doing what I wanted. It was more fulfilling. It was transforming. By letting go of myself and serving someone whom I loved, I reached a state of humility and an otherwise unattainable fulfillment.

I sit down with a group of you and we have a conversation. I ask you a simple question: "what mitzvot have you performed recently?" I am met by an awkward silence. After a few moments someone may offer – "Well I went to shul yesterday"; or, "I bought kosher meat the other day." And many sit there saying nothing. But as soon as I reframe the question and ask: What have you done lately because you felt obligated to do it? What have you done lately because you had to? What have you done lately because you felt a sense of responsibility to someone or for someone – to something or for something? What have you done lately out of love for someone or something? Well – that begins a very different conversation and a most valuable one at that. That is the conversation I want to have with you.

If I ask you how many of you have a mezuzah on the doorpost of your house because God commanded you to. We will have one kind of conversation – and with many of you a very brief one at that. If I ask you how many of you are here today because God commanded you to be here? We will have one kind of conversation and again with many of you – most of you? – a very brief one. But, if I turn to you and ask – as I do now, how many you feel a responsibility to be here? How many of you feel a sense of obligation to be here; and to whom and why? How many are here today out of a sense of love; and for whom and for what? Well – now I believe we will have a very different conversation – and that my friends is the one I want to have and I want you to have.

Too many of you believe that the observant people in this shul – are the other people – not you. Too many of you come year after year and listen to me speak on behalf of a life of mitzvot and smile politely and assume I have been speaking to someone else.

The truth is: You, my friend, are *shomer mitzvot*, - mitzvah observant! That's right, I'm talking to you! You see, I believe you are much more invested in the concept of mitzvah than you think you are.

What makes me think so? Well, to start with, you are here. Ah, ah, ah – don't try and give me excuses for why you are here – bottom line is that you are – score one mitzvah for you.

Came to shul on Rosh Hashanah – check.

And the truth is that I believe that if we spoke long enough and honestly enough – you might just find that the reason you are here has more to do with mitzvah than you might think.

Yes, I see manifestations of your mitzvah commitment day in and day out – even when you don't see it as such.

I see it when I sit with families in the Intensive Care Unit, the silence lies heavy as the whooshing of the ventilator is the only sound between us. You look at me as you hold your mother or your father's hand in yours and with tears in your eyes you say, "Rabbi, I love my mother with all my heart. I would do anything for her as I have done everything possible to care for her during these last few difficult months. But now, the doctor's say it is time to turn off the machine, to let her die in peace. Rabbi, I want to do the right thing. I need to do the right thing – what should I do?" This love for your mother -- Is this not mitzvah at work in your life?

I see you get up early in the morning and take the train to work –and come back late at night. I ask you why you work so hard – certainly there are easier ways to make a living, cheaper places to live. You speak to me of your children – and your responsibility to them – you need to save for college or pay for day school you need to provide for them. This love for and commitment to your children – is this not mitzvah at work in your lives?

I sit with you in your office or in your living room and we speak of a vision I have for this shul and I ask for your financial help to make it happen – I ask for your support of UJA or JTS or Schechter or so many worthwhile causes that enable us to do good in the world – and you say – "It would be my pleasure to help rabbi." This love of Israel, this commitment to the welfare of your fellow Jews, this desire to make the world a better place – is this not mitzvah at work in your lives?

It is parent's weekend at my children's college. We are invited to sit in on classes and I attend a lecture on international politics. I notice a young man sleeping through most of the professor's lecture and when he is awake – he seems to be busy on his laptop doing email. When the class is over, I politely inquire as to why he bothered coming to class – since he spent so little time paying attention. "To be honest, the lectures are pretty much a waste of time – everything he says is in the text book which I already studied." "So why did you come at all?" I inquire. He smiles and tells me that he made his parents a promise – considering all the money they were paying for him to be at this fancy school – he promised he would never skip a class. He is here – just honoring that promise. When we honor our parents – is this not mitzvah at work in our lives?

Come here, to this shul any night of the week and you will see volunteers hard at work for the welfare of this institution – and this scene is repeated at institutions like this one all over town – at the High School or the Women's Shelter --- people who give up their precious free time to work for *tikun olom* – the welfare of the world – is this not mitzvah at work in your lives?

Are you sitting in shul this year listening to the shofar, or fasting on Yom Kippur, or resolving to be better parents to your children or children to your parents, or getting involved in campaigns to stop genocide in Africa or bring peace to the Middle East, or giving *zedakah* to the Red Cross disaster relief efforts or building homes in New Orleans or supporting our local Federation—are you doing these things and so many others like them, because you are self absorbed and self-indulgent? I think not. And yet, do you do them because, or only because, you believe that God commanded you at Sinai to do them? That may have been the motivation for your great grandfather, but your motivation *is* much more complex. Your sense of responsibility may be to God, or to our community, to your ancestors or to the tradition that

these ancestors transmitted to us. Some of you are doing your best to heed the voice of God and others here are doing their best to heed the voice of conscience – trying to do the right thing and to live the right way. Some of you are here, well, because you see Jewish tradition as a “package deal” in the same way that marriage and parenting are package deals. You are grateful for the life as a whole that these afford you and although not every detail or every duty pleases you equally, you accept them nonetheless as part of the package that is Judaism, grateful for this life, this responsibility, this love. And yes, some of you are here not just because you are supposed to but because you love this tradition, these people – because you love this torah, this life, – because you love God. It *is* complicated – but that’s what makes it so wonderful!

So, let the conversation begin.

- When you go home today have a conversation around your *yontif* table – talk about the things you do out of a sense of responsibility, out of a sense of obligation, out of a sense of love – and then talk about how these are manifestations of mitzvah.
- If the rabbi calls and invites you to participate in this pilot conversation here at TBS which will be so crucial for us and for our Movement – say yes.
- Buy a copy of Dr. Ron Wolfson’s book: “God’s To-Do List – 103 ways to be an angel and do God’s work on earth. Read it and discuss it with your family. (Order forms available in lobby)
- Get involved here at TBS – join us as we build a community dedicated to mitzvot and repair of the world. Sign up for adult education courses, join us on Shabbat and holidays, make sure your children are receiving a Jewish education, talk to me about Camp Ramah or USY Israel trips. 50 of you will be traveling with me to Israel this December – check.
- Build a sukkah, shake a lulav – check, check.
- Sign up for Shabbat 1000 -- It is our goal to have 1000 of you, join us for a Friday night Shabbat celebration so that together we will enjoy the fun of family, community and worship. And we want you all to come for dinner and one of our exciting and dynamic Friday Night Live experiences. Where, you ask will we put 1000 people for dinner? No problem – we plan on holding it Friday night June 6 (or a rain date of the following Friday night June 13) outside. Tables will be set up in the parking lot – we will barbeque before Shabbat, then we will make Kiddush and share Shabbat dinner and then we will have a rockin’ and rollin’ Service and celebration – and we will not rest till we have 1000 of you signed up. When you register – you will get one of these pins that say: “Count me in for Shabbat 1000 at TBS – I’m #” You will receive more information on this in the mail – this is going to be a memorable and remarkable event – I know you will want to be there but don’t delay – we are definitely cutting registration off at 1000!
- Get started making your life list for 5768. In order to help, you hopefully found one of these sheets on your chair. On one side it asks you to list 10 things you currently do because you feel you have to, and then it asks for you to explain why? Do you do them out of a sense of obligation, out of a sense of love and to whom or to what? On the other side it asks you to list 10 *mitzvot* that you would *like* to observe in the year to come – and why? And, then we will ask you to share these lists with us. We will post them on our TBS web site (if you permit us) and use them to inspire others. We will form *havurot* based on your lists. If there are a group of people in our shul whose list includes: “learning to say Friday night Kiddush”- we will form a group to learn this together. If some of you put down that you want to “work to end genocide in Darfur,” we will form a *havura* that will work together towards that noble mitzvah. After *yontif* – this form will be posted on our web site: www.tbsroslyn.org and you can fill it out online – or mail this sheet in to the shul.

How will you fill your life list for 5768? Want to go bungee jumping or climbing the Great Wall of China – *gezinderheit*. But I do hope your life list will make some room for God's life list.

And if you are one of those who is not even sure you believe in God – how can I expect you to sign on for *mitzvot*?" As my good friend and colleague Rabbi Ed Feinstein says: "You will believe what you do, long before you'll do what you believe." And when we read the Bible, it becomes clear that God does not ask us to believe; God asks us to do. The Bible is filled with God doing. What is God so busy doing in the Bible? God Creates, God Blesses, God Rests, God Calls, God Comforts, God Cares, God Repairs, God Wrestles, God Gives, God Forgives.

Not a bad list. Why not make God's life list, your life list. I invite you to join me in the vital work of this *kehila kedosha* – this sacred community, committed to doing God's work. Let 5768 be a year when we will create and bless and rest and call and comfort and care and repair, when we will wrestle and give and forgive and we will do it all together.

Being Jewish does not require you to believe in God. But you may find God by doing sacred acts of lovingkindness. Because when you help someone else, when you light Shabbat candles, when you call someone who is lonely, when you bless your children and grandchildren, when you do something to make a difference in the world, you may find God right there in your hands...in your heart. This New Year, let us commit ourselves to do sacred acts that change people's lives... and in the process, change our own...renew our own.

Shana Tova – may it be a new year of goodness, blessing and purpose.

**Temple Beth Sholom
Roslyn, New York
Life List – 5768**

What are the things you feel obligated to do as a human being/as a Jew?
Things I feel obligated to do. Why I feel obliged to do them.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

What are the Mitzvot you would like to observe/explore in the coming year?

Mitzvot I would like to observe/explore

Why I would like to do them?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Name _____ telephone # or email address _____

Mail to: Temple Beth Sholom 401 Roslyn Rd. Roslyn Heights, NY 11577 or fill out on-line at:

www.tbsroslyn.org

Yes, you may share my list with others

Box – Yes, I would like to join in a *havurah* with others who share my mitzvah interests

Go to: www.jtsa.edu and click on Inauguration under Events to read Chancellor Eisen's Inauguration speech and *mitzvah* challenge