

Shabbos Drasha by Rabbi Ze'ev Smason
Parshas Tetzaveh February 8, 2014

Be a Person with a Purpose

I've got a confession to make: I love reading obituaries. Maybe it's just because I'm a rabbi, but I *love* reading the tales of lives lived -- everyone from ordinary neighbors to the famous. Everyone has a life, and everyone has a story to be told when that life ends.

The only thing minimally required in a proper obituary is the obituary itself. What I mean is -- the single most important requirement for an obituary is that the subject actually be dead when the obituary appears. Sound obvious? I think so! However, surprisingly, premature obituaries occur a lot more than you'd think. Whether the person has faked their death, been declared dead when they were still alive, or mistaken to have died, there are many cases of obituaries that are premature.

Did you ever wonder who would show up for your funeral after you died? Well, a guy by the name of Vuk Peric did, and decided to find out. Peric lived in Serbia and decided, in 1997, to put his own obituary in the local newspaper and sent out his own funeral invitations. Watching the funeral from a distance, he walked into the services and thanked everyone for attending and then invited them to his wake. "I wanted to see people smiling at my funeral and was curious who would come," he told a local newspaper.

After Ernest Hemingway and his wife were involved in two African plane crashes in 1954, newspapers mistakenly reported that both had died. It was later claimed that Hemingway read a scrapbook of his obituaries every morning with a glass of champagne after the incident.

Rudyard Kipling's death was once incorrectly announced in a magazine, to which he wrote, "I've just read that I am dead. Don't forget to delete me from your list of subscribers."

My favorite premature obituary story is about Alfred Nobel (I guess that proves I'm a rabbi. Who else would have 'favorite obituary stories'?) You probably recognize the name 'Nobel' from the famous 'Nobel Prizes' that are given annually. But you might not know that Alfred Nobel, a Swedish chemist, was also the inventor of dynamite. What's the connection between dynamite and the Nobel Prizes? When Nobel's brother Ludvig died in 1888, a French reporter carelessly reported the death of the wrong brother. The headline said, 'The Merchant of Death is Dead!'

Can you imagine what it would be like to see your own obituary -- particularly an obituary that summed up your life as being the 'Merchant of Death?' Upon reading this obituary, Alfred Nobel was shaken to his very core. He saw himself as the world saw him -- 'the dynamite King,' and the 'Merchant of Death'.

Nobel was so disgusted by this sudden realization of how the world looked at him, and how he would be remembered, that on the spot he resolved to use his wealth to change his legacy. When Nobel died in 1896, he left almost his entire massive fortune for awards to people whose work was of benefit to humanity. In doing so, he successfully turned around what society thought of him. Today, almost no one associates Alfred Nobel with death from the use of dynamite.

Alfred Nobel had a clear vision how he wanted the purpose of his life to be remembered.

To be a 'Person With a Purpose' is a noble goal (no pun intended). And living a purposeful life is a topic in this week's portion.

In parshas Tetzaveh, Hashem gives the specifications on how the clothing of the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) is to be made. Since the process requires precise work, Hashem wanted the clothing to be made by:

...the wise-hearted people whom I have invested with... wisdom.

.... asher mee'lay'siv ruach chachmah (Exodus 28:3)

Hashem wanted those individuals whom He "*invested* with ... wisdom" to be the ones in charge of making the *Kohen Gadol's* clothing. What does it mean that Hashem *invested* wisdom? It means exactly what is meant by any other investment. When an investment is made, a return on the investment isn't just hoped for, but expected. Hashem makes an investment in us when He gives each of us a unique and special talent. Would you buy a stock whose policy was never to pay any dividends or to increase in value? Of course not.

Growing up, most of us hear from our parents that we are "unique in our own way." As children, we embrace this idea, and tap into our special talents in one way or another. Whether we have a passion and excitement for math, sports, music, art, writing, or cooking -- as youngsters we're clearly aware of the things that come easily to us and that bring us joy. In fact, we often wonder why everyone else has such a hard time with what comes so naturally to us. This is called 'G-d-given talent' that was a pure gift from our Creator.

But then a sad thing happens as a person gets older - he or she stops using or fails to channel this talent. Instead, he squashes it and convinces himself that the invested talent isn't really that big of a deal. What an unbelievably huge mistake to make.

There's the story of a little fellow returning home from his first day of school. The teacher had asked the students to bring copies of their birth certificates so the school could be sure of accurate records. But certificate was a pretty big word for the boy to handle, although he had grasped the idea. Bounding into the house with his important message, he promptly called out, "Mom, tomorrow I have to bring my excuse for being born."

That's an interesting way to put it -- an excuse for living. Everyone should have one. What's your excuse? Anyone's life can be noble, productive, and useful; or it can be unproductive, wasted ...or worse.

Most of you heard of the tragic passing of Phillip Seymour Hoffman. The outstanding Oscar Award-winning actor died this past week of a heroin overdose at the age of 46. An indication of the truth that every person is born with a purpose was our intuitive reaction to the news of Hoffman's death. I'm sure you felt, as I did: "What a tragedy, what a loss, what a waste." Not only was Hoffman's death a tremendous loss for his children and family, but a loss of his brilliant performances that we'll never see. Father James Martin S.J is a Jesuit priest who met Philip Seymour Hoffman when the actor came for advice about a role. Father Martin said of Hoffman:

He was so intent on getting everything right. I remember he asked if a priest would have 3 x 5 cards during a homily. Small details. He listened to what I had to say, but he also knew his craft. When you watched him act, you got a sense of what the word 'vocation' really means. He was born to do this.

Everyone is born to do something special. It all depends upon our choices. We can reach for the highest goals, or we can aim at nothing and hit it.

The importance of living a purposeful life was beautifully expressed by Viktor Frankl, a psychotherapist who survived Auschwitz. Frankl wrote about this in *Man's Search for Meaning*, one of the most widely read books of our time:

Don't ask what you want from life. Ask what life wants from you. The great lives are ones where people heard a call, had a sense of vocation. That is what set Abraham, grandfather of monotheism, on his journey and eventually it changed the world. Moses might have lived a life of affluence and ease as a prince of Egypt, but he heard the cry of his people as they suffered under slavery, and G-d's call to him to lead them into freedom.

The following story beautifully illustrates the importance of knowing your purpose.

Greyhound racing, a popular betting sport in some parts of the country, attracts crowds who enjoy watching incredibly sleek and beautiful dogs run as fast as they can around a track. Unlike race horses, greyhounds run without the assistance of a jockey. To keep the dogs running in the right direction, they are trained to chase a mechanical rabbit made of fur as it zips along the track in front of

them. A man in the press box electronically controls the speed of the rabbit, keeping the rabbit just out in front of the dogs. The dogs never catch up to it.

At a Florida tack some years back, a big race was about to begin. The dogs crouched in their cages, ready to go, while betting spectators finished placing their wagers. At the proper moment, the gun went off. The man in the press box pushed his lever, starting the rabbit down the first stretch, while the cage doors flew open, releasing the dogs to take off after the little rabbit. As the rabbit made the first turn, however, an electrical short in the system caused the rabbit to come to a complete stop, to explode, and to go up in flames. Poof! All that was left was a bit of black stuff hanging on the end of a wire.

Their rabbit gone, the bewildered dogs didn't know how to act. According to news reports, several dogs simply stopped running and laid down on the track, their tongues hanging out. Two dogs, still frenzied with the chase, ran into a wall, breaking several ribs. Another dog began chasing his tail, while the rest howled at the people in the stands.

Not one dog finished the race.

Like racing greyhounds, people pursue their chosen rabbit. Humans need some reason for living -- for running the race. What is your goal, your purpose in life, your hope? What if it were taken away? Sadly, many people chase an illusion, a mechanical rabbit of sorts, that ultimately turns out to offer no hope at all.

What motivates you to run the race? What should be our motivation and purpose?

Parshas Tetzaveh describes the manufacture of the priestly garb, clothes that are created *"Kavod u'"Tiferes*, "for glory and splendor" (ibid 28:2). For the glory and splendor of whom? Not for the *Kohen Gadol* -- but for G-d. Thus, one of the functions of the *Kohen Gadol* is to bring the glory and splendor of G-d to our world of the mundane.

Glorify G-d. Sounds religious, doesn't it? But it doesn't only mean 'saving the world'; it also means, as was said before, making Hashem's investment in us really count.

Author Thomas S. Haggai tells about an old man who, year after year, had a line waiting for him to shine shoes at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. When asked how he could shine shoe after shoe, with such enthusiasm and determination, he smiled with a warm, wide grin and said simply, "I'm not just shining your shoes. I'm working to make you proud of how you look."

There's a man with a mission. No wonder people were lined up at his stand.

Hashem makes an investment in each and every one of us when He gives each of us a unique and special talent. Use that talent ...we justify the investment.

Charles Francis Adams, a famous 19th century political figure and diplomat, kept a diary. One day he entered: "Went fishing with my son today--a day wasted." His son, Brook, also kept a diary, which is still in existence. On that same day, Brook Adams made this entry: "Went fishing with my father--the most wonderful day of my life!"

The father thought he was wasting his time while fishing with his son, but his son saw it as an investment of time. The only way to tell the difference between wasting and investing is to know one's ultimate purpose in life and to judge accordingly.

We have the responsibility - not just the option - to use whatever unique talent G-d has given us, and give God a return on His investment.

Writer Dorothy Parker once sent a telegram to a friend who had a baby:
Congratulations, we all knew you had it in you.

We're all designed for greatness -- because we've all 'got it in us.' And the one-way ticket to accomplish

greatness is to use that talent we were given at birth. G-d expects a return on His investment, as we see in this week's Torah portion:

"...the wise-hearted people whom I have invested with... wisdom."

And when you use what you've been given, you're immediately beginning to pay interest on the investment. And then watch how much more you get entrusted with.