

THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG

Welcoming all who seek a Progressive vision of Jewish life

SHABBAT SHALOM

8 – 9 January, 2016

28 Tevet 5776

Parashat Va'eira
(Exodus 6:2-9:35)

Rabbi Stanton M. Zamek
Rabbi Martha Bergadine, Education & Programming Director
Cantor Melissa Berman, Cantor/Programming Associate

From the Rabbi's desk

(I want to share with you these excerpts from a drasha I gave on January 1st. What follows is suggested strategy on how we can make 2016 a year of true personal growth.)

Two years ago, after having been blown away by Charles Duhigg's book, The Power of Habit, I gave a drasha I called the 5 habits of Highly Holy People. I will remind you of these habits in a bit, but Duhigg's premise is more important. Duhigg reminds us that "most of the choices we make each day may feel like the products of well-considered decision making, but they're not, they're habits." Many of these habits, Duhigg writes "emerge without our permission" and once these habits are set, they are self-executing - the program just runs, whether the result is good for us or not. That's the bad news. The good news is that if we understand the habit forming loop of trigger, routine, and reward, we can overwrite our bad habits with good ones. And if we do this with what Duhigg calls "keystone habits," we can effect significant improvement in our lives with relatively small changes in our behavior.

The idea that change is best achieved by this extremely specific, granular approach grabbed me and has never let go. It is just so Jewish. To give just one example, Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk counseled that we can change negative aspects of our nature with 40 days of concentrated efforts on particular habits. And in a very Duhiggian way he claims that this is the case "for in everything, habit is king."

However deep our resolve to change, if our commitment is not connected to habit there is nothing solid to anchor it. We will drift back to what we know, to what we have always been.

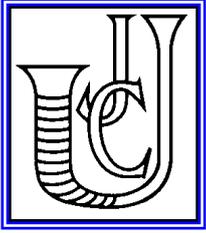
The Rabbis well understood how easily we are overcome by inertia, how easily aspirations can be defeated by laziness. In Proverbs we learn: *A lazy man says, "There's a lion on the road, a lion in the streets". The door turns on its hinge, And the lazy man on his bed.* This is what the Midrash makes of this: When a lazy one is told, "your teacher is in the next town, go and learn from him," he says "oh no, I am afraid of meeting a lion on the way." When he is told, "your teacher is in the area, go study with him," he says, "oh no, there might be a lion in the streets." When he is told that his teacher is at home (close by), he says "Oh no, if I go there the door will be bolted." And when he is told that the door is open, "the door turns on its hinge," he says "I want to sleep a little longer."

Speaking from experience, and I am sure you all could speak with equal authority, it is easy to come up with "a lion on the road," a reason not to do what we should do and at one level want to do. We have to duck and weave to get inside our own defenses, shift our habits, and put the change we want to make in our lives out of the reach of our thoughts. Thinking is the problem. We think ourselves out of change. To paraphrase Master Yoda: Always with us what cannot be done.

So now is the time to break our aspirations down into the constituent habits that will allow us to achieve them. In the Five Habits of Highly Holy People, I suggested the following as keystone habits of a richer Jewish life:

1. Take a daily study vitamin - take a small daily dose of Jewish study from a text of your choice.

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From the Rabbi's desk (con't)

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2. Speak holy words - use key phrases to frame your day with holiness: *Modeh ani lifenacha*, I thank you O God, *hodu l'adonai ki tov*, Give thanks to HaShem for HaShem is good, or maybe - there is no lion on the road!
3. Be the first to extend a greeting - make being welcoming a habit.
4. Go pingless - bracket time, particularly on Shabbat, when you do not allow any electronic schlepping on your attention.
5. Show up more at shul to be with the chevre.

These were just suggestions. Your holy habits may vary. And I would say, that anything that we do that makes us better, healthier, more joyous, calmer, easier to live with, is a holy habit. If Duhigg is right, and I believe he is, a few well chosen habits, once established will have a systemic effect. We probably know where work is needed in our lives and we should just get about it. Reflection is good, but it has to lead to action and not analysis paralysis.

I do want to offer one refinement, an element I missed when I last spoke about holy habits. Once we have a plan, a specific, granular, behavior modifying plan, we need to write it down. There is a long-standing tradition of carrying and consulting lists of *hanhagot*, spiritual directives for everyday life, that we would be wise to adopt. It is easier to evade a commitment that resides only in our thoughts, than one that is in front of our eyes in black and white. If we externalize our thoughts in this way, our plan will have more authority. And if we also keep account in writing of how well we are doing in sticking to the plan we have even a greater chance of keeping ourselves honest.

We all hope that 2016 will be a good year for us. In some ways the shape of the year is beyond our control. But what is firmly within our power is how we live each day. We can allow the unconscious routines of the past to run as they will and take us wherever they like. Or we can identify the bad code we have allowed to develop and overwrite it with a program of our choosing, with holy habits that help us become who we aspire to be and who the Holy One desires us to be. Let's not just hope for a good year, let's work for it - through the power of holy habits.

Happy New Year
Shabbat Shalom

All Blessings,
Rabbi Z
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7th January 2016