

What Are Your Rocks?

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A professor of philosophy stands before his class with some items in front of him. When the class begins, wordlessly he picks up a large empty jar and proceeds to fill it with rocks about two inches in diameter. He then asks the students if the jar is full.

They agree that it is full.

So the professor then picks up a box of pebbles and pours them into the jar. He shakes the jar lightly and watches as the pebbles roll into the open areas between the rocks. The professor then asks the students again if the jar is full.

They laugh and agree that it is indeed full this time.

The professor picks up a box of sand and pours it into the jar. The sand fills the remaining open areas of the jar. "Now," says the professor, "I want you to recognize that this jar is your life. The rocks are the important things, such as family, health and relationships. If all else was lost and only the rocks remained, your life would still be meaningful. The pebbles are the other things that matter in your life, such as work or school. The sand signifies the remaining "small stuff" and material possessions.

If you put sand into the jar first, there is no room for the rocks or the pebbles. The same is true in our lives. If we spend all our time and energy on the small stuff, we will never have room for the things that are truly important.

We have to pay attention and tend to the rocks first – things that really matter. Set our priorities. The rest is just pebbles and sand.

The question to begin the new year is simple - What are the rocks/priorities in your life? Think for a moment, what comes to mind first? I would imagine that most people would respond, "my family" In my experience, it is usually a person's loved ones that they think of at the important moments in life.

But, then, think about the reality of your life. Does your life reflect that this is your priority? Do you pass by other opportunities in order to spend time with your family? What is it that you DO that reflects the priority in your life?

Clearly stating our own priorities is the easy part. Living that way is much more difficult.

So many things get in the way of what we want to devote our time to doing.

The word we use for these pebbles and sand that distract us or get in the way of our priorities is the word "chet" often translated as sin or transgression and it's the same word as we use for an arrow, which has missed its mark. We may have had all the right intentions, in the year gone by, but somehow along the way, the trajectory of our life has veered off course a bit, missing the bulls eye. It is as if we are walking mindlessly down a path and suddenly look up to see that we ended up somewhere totally different than we expected.

Many people think of themselves as moral, good people, but it is only when we stop and reflect on our actions and their consequence that perhaps, the jar is full of sand, not rocks, and we are not who we thought we were.

To me, the most important point of these High Holy Days is that we do stop our lives, and turn everything off and tune everything else out, except to inspect our own actions, recognize and correct our wrongdoings, and reset the course for our lives. Anything is possible. As a popular Israeli song says, "Every year begins with a question mark" and we answer the question with the story of our lives, every minute, every hour, and every day of our lives by living out the priorities we set and live by!

How can we remember the ROCKS every day?

Our tradition teaches us Shuv yom echad lifnei mitach, Repent one day before you die (Pirke Avot 2:15), but since we of course don't know when that will be, Rabbi Eliezer gives us the answer, "A person should repent every day, lest he die tomorrow." We never know what is going to happen.

And every day is full of difficult choices today as it was for our ancestor, Abraham. In the Torah portion we read tomorrow, Abraham and Sarah finally have a son, Isaac, and after Sarah realizes the competition he will have with Abraham's first born son, Ishmael, born to Hagar, the Egyptian, she says to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." Abraham sends them away in the wilderness of Beersheva, not an easy decision, to be sure.

But in today's families lives, there are so many tough choices every day...about where to focus our attention, how to spend our income and our time. In these difficult economic times, resources are less abundant for most families, which means choosing and prioritizing, hopefully not one child over another as Abraham did, but certainly allocating resources.

The "stay-cation" was very popular over the last year, and I think it is one of the best examples of how something great can come out of crisis. People may not have taken an extravagant trip that they were planning, but staying home, spending time NOT working, and enjoying the beautiful surroundings we have here in the Paradise of South Florida was not a bad way for some families to make a sacrifice and spend a few days together. Instead of taking tours and looking at the sights, hopefully some spent time looking at each other and reconnecting. I highly recommend a "stay-cation" or even just a quiet Shabbat together as a way to turn these difficult times into more down time for our families to spend together, NOT doing much more than playing a board game together. It is a great way to spend a DAY prioritizing our time together as a family.

How can we remember the ROCKS every hour?

How we spend our hours matters. I remember when our boys were born, counting every hour, between feedings, counting the (very few) hours of sleep everyone got, and keeping track of every hour of activity. I even had an acronym I remember well, which I learned from one of the many parenting books I read: EASY: Eat, Activity, Sleep, and You time. These were supposed to be the way the time blocks were broken down: it could be a block of 2,3, or 4 hours: Eat, Activity, Sleep, and You time. That was intended for babies, but now that I think about it, it's not such a bad plan for any of us!

Every hour matters and counts, especially when it comes to how we are spending them. And this is the time for counting. Cheshbon nefesh is the term for an accounting of our soul that we do at this time – and so, it is also a counting of time – how did we spend it? Did we spend our hours as we would have liked to do this year?

As it is said in a book by William J. Doherty and Barbara Z. Carlson, called Putting Family First: Successful Strategies for Reclaiming Family Life in a Hurry-Up World, "we don't easily assign ourselves "parent points" for providing our children with time to daydream and make up games to play with the neighbors. Parenting has become a competitive sport, with trophies going to the busiest." In fact, it is often the family activities, like dinners, weekend outings, vacations and visits to relatives which are the first priorities to go, in the face of the competing demands on our children. "We end up with overscheduled and under-connected families." We must make our hours count.

How can we remember the ROCKS every moment?

Here is a way to test your priorities right now – think about what would happen if you had, God forbid, only five more minutes to live:

What would you do?

Who would you call?

Would you see your life flash before your eyes and would it make you smile?

The rabbis say that humans have two inclinations: the yeitzer ha-ra and the yeitzer ha-tov: the inclination that leads us toward the bad and the inclination that leads us toward the good. Both of them reside within each of us every minute. We choose, moment after moment, which way we will incline.

We have this time, this opportunity to review the past year and recall our transgressions. We must use these few moments during the Days of Awe to reflect, rethink, and set our own course for a good year ahead. The true work of repentance is to reflect, be remorseful, and repair our relationships in whatever way we can, and finally be ready to turn to the year ahead with the resolve not to miss the mark, but to live out our priorities and distinguish the rocks from the sand, to tell the story with our lives that we want to tell!

As my camp director used to say on the first day of every session of camp, "Don't waste a minute!" You will be surprised how quickly time will fly and we will find ourselves back here again, asking how it is possible that another year has flown by. Don't waste a minute with the sand and pebbles. Concentrate on how you will live in the year ahead to answer the question that begins this year: What are the rocks/the priorities in your life?

I share with you the beautiful words of the Israeli song, Kol Shanah:

Every year begins with a question mark
Like a baby who measures its steps
Like a sunrise that appears above the blue Kineret
Facing the western sky.
Every hour begins with a question mark
Like the heart that beats rhythmically
Like a greenish stalk that sprouts slowly

Facing the high mountaintops.
It is wonderful that the year begins
With song and good spirits
Every year begins with a question mark
And we will find its answers.
Every second begins with a question mark
And before you answer, it escapes
Like the caress of the sea wind that appears from somewhere
Whose melody will be heard from afar.

This year, at Temple Judea, we are studying the teachings of Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav, a great Hassidic master, who offers this prayer: Dear God, as I age - as hours turn to days, days to weeks, weeks to months, and months to years - let none of my time be wasted or lost. Let me use my life to the fullest, to become the person I am meant to be.
Amen. Shanah Tovah!

Closing Blessing:

May our lives be filled with blessing in the year 5770 and may our lives reflect the values that matter most, throughout the year, every day, every hour, every moment.