

Not Knowing What To Ask For

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“Achat sha’alti me’et hashem, otta avakesh, shivty b’beit hashem kol yemei chayayei, lachzot b’noam hashem, ulvaker b’heichalo.” Only one thing I asked of the Lord, that shall I seek: That I dwell in the House of the Lord all the days of my life; to behold the sweetness of the Lord and to contemplate in His sanctuary.

The Psalmist sings, *“Achat shaalty”* – I ask for only one thing. Only one thing do I seek....And this year, more than ever before, we struggle with these very words...

In a single year, our world changed dramatically. Investments turned upside down, salaries undermined or simply taken away. Our expectations have shifted. Our dreams for the future overturned.

We have changed.

And all that was granted is now no longer guaranteed.

At times like these, what do we ask for?

At times like these, what shall we seek from the King of kings, the Master of the universe?

At times like these, what demands shall we make as we turn to God, to the world, to ourselves?

My rabbi’s father, R. Avi Weiss’ *abba*, recently celebrated his 90th birthday. The entire family gathered to celebrate this momentous occasion in *Eretz Yisrael*, where he has been living as a widower for many years. In the months leading up to the celebration, his children inquired of him, *“Abba, what do you want for your birthday?”* And after repeating their request several times, R. Weiss’ father finally replied, *“I have had the same pair of *teffilin* all my life, and they’re just a little worn, and so maybe a new pair would be nice.”* He later added, *“A new *talit* wouldn’t hurt either.”*

A man turns ninety, and what does he ask for, a new pair of *teffilin* and a new *talis*.

The story reminded me of one of my last conversations with Julius Magid, of blessed memory, a beloved grandfatherly figure in our community.

A few days before Julius turned ninety five, I asked him what he wanted for his birthday. Sweet Julius didn't blink for a second. "I would like to be raised on a chair," was his immediate reply. He passed away a couple of months later, but on his birthday we did manage to lift him up on a chair.

A man turns ninety five, and what does he ask for, to be raised on a chair.

These stories make it apparent to me that the sort of things people ask for in ripe old age, towards the completion of their life, can become instructive to us, both young and old, about the sort of things we ought to be thinking about while we're still alive.

The Machzor, our High Holiday prayer book makes a similar point.

In the moving introduction to the Mussaf service, of both Rosh HaShannah and Yom Kippur, the prayer leader pleads on behalf of himself and the community. "*Hineni, he'anni mi'mas*" – "Here I am impoverished of deeds." "*Ba'ati la'amod u'lehitchanen lefaneicha*" – "I have come to stand and supplicate before You." Towards the end of this moving section, the prayer leader makes the following demand, which I believe is both instructive and critical to our understanding of *tefillah*, of prayer.

"*Kabel teffilati kitefillat zakken, ve'ragil, u'pirku na'eh*" – "Accept my prayer like the prayers of an experienced elder, granted a good portion of life."

The key here is "*kitefillat zakken*" – "Like the prayers of an elder."

Now the prayer leader may be young or old, and we all know old people who are young, and young people who are old, and the prayer leader may be experienced or inexperienced, and he may be granted a long life, or God forbid, a shorter life, and yet, no matter the age of the person, no matter his past or his future, the Machzor insists that during the act of prayer itself, the *davener*, the praying individual, and here each one of us is included, ought to adopt the disposition, the internal sense of self, of a “*zakken*,” an elderly person, “*upirku na’eh*” who was granted a complete portion of life.

While the Machzor in this very section fails to fully paint the actual inner world of this “*zakken*,” this idealized elderly person, as a religious prototype, it is clear that the Torah’s model of a “*zakken, ve’ragil, u’pirku na’eh*” – “an experienced elder, granted a good portion of life” is none other than *Avraham Avinu*, Abraham the Patriarch, the first person to be called a “*zakken*” an elderly in the Torah. As it says: “*Ve’Avraham zakken, bah ba’yamin, ve’hashem beirach et Avraham bakol*” – “Abraham was old, advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham with everything.”

This verse is a moving, yet jarring, summation of Abraham’s life.

For a moment think of Abraham...What did Abraham pray for in old age? What did Abraham long for as his life drew to a close? Well, probably nothing, Abraham, we are told, was blessed with everything.

And yet, a closer examination of Abraham’s life reveals a more nuanced, complex, even painful picture.

Towards the end of his life, Abraham became widowed from his beloved wife Sarah who had died years before him. Furthermore, the Torah remains ambiguous as to whether or not Abraham ever merited meeting his grandchildren, Isaac’s children, Yaakov and Esav. Finally, in actuality, Abraham never got to inherit the land promised to him by God years earlier. His offspring would have to be enslaved and only several generations later would they truly inherit the Promised Land. And so, it appears that at the very end of his life, Abraham’s journey of

lecha lecha was not yet complete, the grand promises of God not yet fulfilled, his hardships never fully rewarded.

Abraham, we are told, was blessed with everything. So what exactly is everything?

The truth of the matter is that for some of us, everything is not necessarily everything. In fact, we all know people, who appear to be blessed with everything and still they want everything that is not everything that is already theirs. On the other hand, there are people who appear to have nothing, nothing, but to whom a little something is everything. And perhaps this is the lesson of Mishnah Avoth: “*Eizehu ashir – ha’sameach be’chelko*” – “Who is considered rich? One satisfied with his or her portion.”

Avraham Avinu was likely not blessed with everything. It is quite clear that every one of his accomplishments had a competing failure, every achievement was met by an unfulfilled dream, and every success was fractured by a promise not yet fulfilled.

In the world of *midrash*, our rabbis argue ferociously about what exactly this “*bakol*,” this *everything* that Abraham was so blessed with was. And yet, I believe that the very simple answer must be that Abraham was likely blessed with the unique humility that sometimes comes through the experience of living a complete or full life.

Abraham was a “*zakken, ve’ragil, u’pirku na’eh*” – “an experienced elder, granted a good portion of life.”

Abraham’s everything was not one thing in particular, for there is always another thing, and another. Rather, Abraham’s everything was life itself, the experience of recognizing that life had been granted to him in the first place.

From the perspective of *Avraham hazakken*, Abraham the elder, Abraham facing his own death, life itself was the only thing that came close to anything or...everything.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we are asked to become *Avraham hazakken*, Abraham the elder, if only for this time of prayer. No matter our age, no matter our portion of life, no matter our life's experiences, our failures and accomplishments, during this time, we must all be humbled by life itself. We must all cultivate a perspective of life as it is seen from its end. We must all cultivate a perspective of a "*zakken, ve'ragil, u'pirku na'eh*" – "an experienced elder, granted a good portion of life" no matter our given circumstances of life.

On the morning of the First Day of Rosh HaShannah I woke up with my son in my arms and out of nowhere tears began rolling down my face. For a moment I was a "*zakken, ve'ragil, u'pirku na'eh*" – "an experienced elder, granted a good portion of life." For a moment, I was granted an outside perspective on a young man and his five month old son. Life is fragile, it slips by too fast, and we just don't know what the future bears. But for a moment that morning, like Abraham, I felt blessed with the fragility of everything.

At times like these, what do we ask for?

The *zakken, the elder* within us replies: HAKOL – Everything. At times like these, we do not ask for anything specific.

At times like these, what shall we seek from the King of kings, the Master of the universe?

And the *zakken, the elder*, within us replies: HAKOL – everything. At times like these, we seek the humility that comes from having lived a full life.

At times like these, what demands shall we make as we turn to God, to the world, to ourselves?

Says the *zakken, the elder* within us: HAKOL – everything. At times like these, we only demand life itself.

"Zochreinu l'chaim, melech chafetz ba'chaim, ve'chatveinu be'sefer ha'chaim, le'mancha Elhoim chaim" – "Remember us for *life*, O King Who desires *life*, and inscribe us in the Book of *Life*, for Your sake, O *living* God."

On Yom Kippur we ask for life itself, nothing more, and nothing less.

Several years before Abraham Joshua Heschel's death in 1972, he suffered a near-fatal heart attack from which he never fully recovered. His quintessential student, R. Samuel Dresner went to his apartment in New York to visit him.

Dresner writes: "[Heschel] had gotten out of bed for the first time to greet me and was sitting in the living room when I arrived, looking weak and pale. He spoke slowly and with some effort, almost in a whisper. I strained to hear his words.

"Sam," he said, "when I regained consciousness, my first feelings were not of despair or anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I had lived. I was ready to depart. 'Take me, O Lord,' I thought, 'I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime.'"

Exhausted by the effort, he paused for a moment, and then added: "I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder. And God gave it to me."

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