

## “A Jewish ‘Life List’”

### **Rabbi Scheinberg’s Kol Nidrei Sermon 2007 / 5768:**

*I am always grateful for the feedback I receive on my High Holiday sermons. I have received a lot of feedback on the sermon below—mostly positive—and I am eager to receive more. I would be grateful if you would send me an e-mail ([rabbi@hobokensynagogue.org](mailto:rabbi@hobokensynagogue.org)) and let me know any of your impressions, which could include how many of the items on the list you have experienced thus far in your life; whether you think the items on the list are too ambitious, not ambitious enough, or just about right; and what you think about the idea of a ‘life list’ in general.*

*I must acknowledge that Rabbi Avis Miller of Washington DC wrote a sermon along these lines, long before the current popularity of Life Lists, which greatly inspired me when I read it several years ago. A couple of the items on my list were also on her list - especially “Maimonides’ 8<sup>th</sup> level of tzedakah.*

*Please know that I am currently compiling an additional list of items that I might recommend for those who have completed all the items below, as well as a list of some of the Jewish skills and experiences that my wife Naomi and I aspire to. Even though we are both rabbis, there are plenty of Jewish experiences we have not yet had and hope to achieve.*

One of the themes of Yom Kippur seems to be making lists: lists of categories of vows that get annulled in Kol Nidrei; lists of sins to which we confess in Al Chet; lists of loved ones who have died, whom we remember at Yizkor; and perhaps most importantly, the lists we make inside our minds; lists of people to apologize to and to reconcile with, and lists of changes we pledge to make in our lives during the coming year.

List making is in vogue this year in a big way. Look at recent or current best selling books like “101 Things to Do Before I Die,” and “1000 Places to See Before You Die.” These books address the phenomenon of “life lists”: lists of things that people want to accomplish at some point in their lives. It’s a practice adapted from bird watchers who keep lists of the varieties of birds they have seen and aspire to see, and of mountain climbers who keep lists of the mountains they have climbed and aspire to climb. There are books with sample life lists and suggestions for creating your own life lists, and of course there are web sites where you can keep track of your progress towards your list and take a peek at what’s on others’ lists: items like running in a marathon; climbing a tall mountain; skydiving; learning a new language; and—of course—losing weight. And the first “life-list-themed movie” is coming out in December (which makes me think this trend has probably peaked already).

Even if you haven’t written a life list yourself, you probably have a list of your life goals in your mind. Some say that keeping life lists is popular because it’s a practical and tangible way to feel that you are accomplishing goals and that your life has direction. It also permits us to do the difficult but essential work of confronting our mortality, but in a softer, gentler, even fun way! And everyone loves checking items off a list when we’re done with them.

On the one hand, I look at the “life list” phenomenon and I see obvious and appealing parallels in Judaism. One midrash teaches that over the course of one’s lifetime, one should make an effort to have a child, plant a tree, and write a book—as these are three ways to perpetuate one’s influence and legacy in the world after one is gone. There are some of the mitzvot—the commandments—that are described as incumbent upon every Jew at least once in their lives, such as the commandment to assist in the writing of a Torah scroll. And of course, the Jewish life list par excellence is the list of the 613 mitzvot, the 613 commandments of the torah—though, traditionally speaking, that’s not a list of items that you do once and check off.

But at the same time, it is clear that most life lists are written in the spirit of personal fulfillment, rather than in the spirit of personal responsibility that Judaism tends to encourage. Items on a life list are thought of as new experiences to be collected, new thrills to be sought, rather than commitments to be fulfilled to God and the community and the world. And the focus is on novelty, rather than on regularity. Checking items off of a list once they have been accomplished is very different from Jewish tradition that promotes spiritual discipline, that encourages us to take the most important activities in our lives and work them into our regular routine.

But sometimes we are so used to talking about Judaism and Jewish practice as a responsibility, and an obligation, that we forget that many traditional Jewish practices fit quite perfectly on a life list— activities that are fascinating and engaging, that give the satisfaction of accomplishment, and that enable a deeper level of appreciation of life. In fact, those people who make a commitment to do Jewish things on a regular basis, as their own spiritual practice or as their commitment to the mitzvot, usually STARTED to do Jewish things on an OCCASIONAL basis because they found them to be life-enhancing and personally fulfilling.

So whether or not you keep a life list, I'd like to share with you a list of ten experiences that I strongly encourage every Jew to have at least once over the course of their lives. Per the recommendations of the "life list" experts, the items on this list are ambitious but achievable. Some of the items on this list, you may already do all the time; some of them, you may never have done. The goal for all of them, traditionally speaking, is that they get incorporated into one's regular routine. But nothing has ever gotten incorporated into someone's regular routine until it has been accomplished once.

So here is Rabbi Robert Scheinberg's list of 10 Jewish Things to Do Before You Die:

**1: Lead a Passover Seder.**

The Passover Seder is the best example of the educational ingenuity of the Jewish people. Our sages were so wise to say that the seder, the most important Jewish educational experience of the year, ideally takes place in the home, rather than in the synagogue; meaning that every Jewish family is asked to produce a cadre of knowledgeable people who know how to lead a seder. The experience of preparing to lead a Seder can be one of the most intellectually challenging, thought-provoking and entertaining tasks of a Jewish year. And it's a palpable way to experience continuity with thousands of years of Jewish history. Many of us experienced Passover Seders in our childhoods. If they were done right, the memories are magical and timeless. I know I will carry the memory of my grandfather's seders of my childhood throughout the rest of MY life. If you can create such an experience for the next generation, it's a way for YOU to continue to have an effect for many decades into the future. Every spring, I lead training courses to help to prepare a new group of seder leaders for the Jewish world, and it could include you.

**2: Visit Israel**

Jews who have grown up in the United States are often unprepared for the emotional impact of visiting Israel for the first time, where Jewish culture is the normative culture; where Hebrew is not just the language of old books, but of television and government and traffic signs; where the stories of the patriarchs are not just world history, but LOCAL history; and where, in the alliterative words of the medieval poet Yehuda Halevi, *sham ha-shekhinah shekheinah lakh*, you have a sense that the Shekhina, the presence of God, is your neighbor. Jews who have returned from their first trip to Israel almost invariably express to me how deeply moving and engaging the experience was, how it helped them to begin to understand the mysteries of Jewish history and Jewish identity. For many of them, they felt a sense of 'home-coming' upon arrival at a place they had never seen before, but that their ancestors had seen in their dreams for 2,000 years. If you're under age 26, you simply cannot pass up the opportunity to go on a Birthright Israel trip—all expenses paid. And think about our first ever Congregational trip to Israel this coming August.

**3: Take an introduction to Judaism course, or a more advanced course in a Jewish topic, as an adult.**

Most Jews who get a Jewish education in the United States conclude their formal Jewish education at age 13, which means that they're cutting out just as it's getting interesting, just as they are beginning to develop the intellectual and spiritual maturity to understand what Judaism is really all about. One of the failures of American Jewish life is that we have sometimes forgotten that Judaism's for adults, not for kids. Imagine an adult trying to operate in the world with a 13-year-old's understanding of personal finance, or—even worse—a 13-year-old's understanding of relationships and human sexuality. That's roughly analogous to the experience of an adult trying to operate in the Jewish world with a 13-year-old's understanding of Jewish tradition. There are courses offered here at the United Synagogue of Hoboken of varying lengths, including our state-wide 24-session Introduction to Judaism course that fulfills the bulk of the requirements towards conversion to Judaism, which is starting on Wednesday November 7. Classes in Kabbalah, in Jewish history and beliefs, and in Jewish ethics are also on the horizon this fall. If you don't know how to

read Hebrew, it's not so easy, but it's not so hard: you can actually learn in a FREE class, right here, beginning at the end of October. And classes on truly EVERY Jewish subject you could imagine are available in Manhattan; so take advantage of our presence at the very center of the very largest Jewish community in the history of the Jewish people, as well as audio and internet self-study courses to fit any schedule. Contact me and I will help you find the course for you.

**4: Keep one full traditional Shabbat.**

When was the last time you spent an entire day without spending any money, without using a computer or a cell phone, without driving, or watching TV? If you spent such a day recently—unless you are already in the habit of keeping a traditional Shabbat, or unless, God forbid, you were sick—you were probably on vacation in a beautiful natural setting. And that's the effect of Shabbat at its best—a vacation from the distractions of everyday life that weigh us down and prevent us from being the people we are. As we said earlier in our service, *'u-vayom hashvi'i shavat vayinafash.'* On the seventh day, God rested, and fully activated the *nefesh*, the soul, of the world. Different Jews celebrate Shabbat in different ways, but once you have experienced the cleansing and restful effect of 25 consecutive Shabbat hours, you will understand and experience subsequent Shabbatot differently, regardless of the exact manner in which you choose to commemorate them.

**5: Read from the Torah.**

If you can read Hebrew, and you can reasonably carry a tune, and you can set aside a few hours a week to practice, it would take you about one month to learn to chant a very brief section from the Torah during our weekly Shabbat morning services. The power of reading from an actual hand-written Torah scroll, written in almost exactly the same way that it was written thousands of years ago, cannot be exaggerated. As one of our members quoted so movingly in a presentation last Yom Kippur, "Even more than you want to read from the Torah, the Torah wants to be read by you." We have had a number of people in our community learn to read from the Torah this year. It's a project that immediately promotes someone from passive observer of synagogue life to full participant. Volunteers to help you are standing by.

**6: Do a *Hesed* or social action project on a grand scale.**

I'm not talking helping out at the soup kitchen—I'm taking that for granted. I'm talking MUCH bigger. Preferably involving travel. In the last few years, people from our community have built schools in Nepal; built housing in New Orleans and in Central America; delivered medical supplies to Israel; lobbied elected officials on Israel-related issues in Washington; amid all kinds of pro-bono and volunteer efforts. Considering that time is our most important life resource, even more so than money, many of us make the commitment to donate some of our precious vacation time to mitzvah work, whether under Jewish auspices or not. For parents looking to educate children in Jewish social and humanitarian values, the example we set by devoting our vacation time to volunteer *Hesed* work is very powerful. There's a special depth to the friendships that are forged by people who meet through volunteer projects. And you remember the experience long after a 'normal' vacation fades in your memory.

**7: Acquire at least one Jewish skill that you do with your hands rather than your head.**

Judaism is meant to be experienced with the whole body. The full range of Jewish ritual involves construction projects, like building a sukkah; it involves arts and crafts, like creating a tallit, tying tzitzit knots, writing Hebrew calligraphy, or crocheting a kippah; it involves ancient musical instruments, like the shofar; it even involves feats of strength, such as Hagbah, the lifting of the Torah scroll. Yes, the stereotype is that Jews are all cerebral—but it's not true. If the cerebral bias of Jewish life holds you back, this may be the invitation you're waiting for to acquire one of these skills, to do something you enjoy and be a resource for your community at the same time.

**8: Visit a synagogue in a non-English speaking country other than Israel.**

Among my most treasured Jewish experiences have been my visits to synagogues in Eastern Europe, and my interactions with the Jewish communities there. We talk about how the prayerbook is in Hebrew in part so that Jews from around the world can pray together, but relatively few people get to see the miracle of how this functions in practice, how people of diverse backgrounds and cultures and even languages can be

united through the words of the Shema or the Kaddish. People in our community sometimes ask me for help finding synagogues in places around the world they will be visiting, on business or for pleasure, from Vilnius and Madrid, to Singapore and Tokyo. Through the network of rabbis around the world, I can sometimes arrange home hospitality for a Shabbat meal, adding an additional level of meaning and adventure to the travel experience.

**9: Do a Siyyum—an ambitious self-paced Jewish study project.**

It takes just a few minutes each day to read the weekly Torah portion and to complete the study of the entire Torah over the course of a year. Or you could look at the comprehensive books of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, which are ideally suited to self-paced study—one of his books is even divided into exactly 365 chapters. Rabban Gamliel said in Pirkei Avot: *Al tomar lich'she'epaneh eshneh, shema lo tipaneh.* “Don't say, ‘I will study when I have a free moment,’ because who ever has a free moment?” The things that are our true priorities are the things we actually schedule in to our lives. And you would be amazed at how much you can accomplish in just a few minutes a day to help you to feel part of the Jewish conversation.

**10: Fulfill Maimonides' eighth level of tzedakah.**

In Moses Maimonides' famous hierarchy of the various ways to engage in charitable giving, he says that the highest method is “one who gives a needy person a gift or loan, or creates a partnership or a job, to help the needy person to become self-sufficient and no longer dependent on the needs of others.” In general, Maimonides encourages us to give tzedakah in ways that are impersonal, to spare the one who receives tzedakah any embarrassment. But this highest level of tzedakah happens exclusively in the context of a personal relationship. My family likes to tell the story of the businessman who, several decades ago, took an interest in a relative of mine at a time of severe financial and medical stress, and gave her a job and the support and connections necessary to help her to get to the United States and begin a new life here. The bond between his family and my family persists to this day. In addition to all the other tzedakah that you give, at least once in your life, you could probably be that kind of angel for someone else.

Of course there's a lot that didn't make the cut. Study Talmud. Be a tenth person in a minyan. Serve on a synagogue board. Host a Shabbat dinner. Serve on a hevra kadisha—a Jewish burial society, which is one of the most spiritually powerful things you can do. Clean up an old Jewish cemetery. Go to a Jewish meditation retreat. Go an entire week without speaking any Lashon HaRa. (OK, an entire day.) Yes, I'm offering to be your Jewish life coach, free of charge, and we can find the mitzvot that are right for you, right now. (And it should be obvious that such items as bringing items of food to a food drive, or paying a shiva call, or visiting someone in the hospital, I haven't mentioned because those are mitzvot that belong on your 'week list' or your 'month list,' not your 'life list.')

On Rosh HaShanah, I described Mitzvot as “commandments,” as responsibilities and acts of love, and as “leaps of action.” They are a spiritual discipline to which Jews commit ourselves, as compromises of our sovereign self. But this is only one side of the story. Mitzvot are also opportunities for life-enhancement, opportunities for living more deeply, more thoughtfully, and with greater kedushah—greater holiness. In the image of Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, mitzvot are gemstones scattered on a dirt road, free for the taking.

Some of the most beautiful ones are partially embedded in the dirt road. But if you take the time to kneel down and pry them free, you won't be disappointed.

During this new year of 5768, may you merit the opportunity to add many mitzvot to your life list, and may you find great satisfaction in checking them off again and again and again.