

## 1RH 5769 Quality of Life Today

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Barack Obama says that in order to improve your quality of life he will guarantee health care for every American, offer middle-class tax cuts, create jobs by investing in clean energy, support working families and strengthen our schools.

John McCain says that in order to improve your quality of life he will create millions of good American jobs, ensure our nation's energy security, control government spending and bring relief to Americans at the pump and in the marketplace.

When you go into the voting booth on Tuesday, November 4th, you will decide who you believe has the capacity to deliver on his promises, who do you think will be able to lead our country through the maze of international, political, economic and social issues that are challenging us today. Who offers the plan that aligns with your values and your vision of what America should be and what kind of life you want for yourself, your family, our community and our nation.

You decide.

I'm not here this morning to tell you who to vote for.

I hope you *will* vote and make sure your friends, neighbors, colleagues and family members vote as well. If you have young children or grandchildren, neices or nephews, I encourage you to bring them with you to share with them the experience and privelege of voting in this great, democratic county.

So, I'm not here to tell you who to vote for or who I'm voting for...

What I am here to tell you, though, is that I don't think either candidate or any President has the power to improve your quality of life.

Only you do.

Only you have the capacity to look at your life and evaluate how it is being lived. Only you have the capacity to define and assert your own quality of life.

The President's decisions may impact the value of the dollar, the economy's upswings and downturns might impact the bottom line in your **bank account/stock portfolio/IRA...**

But only you decide what kind of life you will make with **whatever you are given, with whatever you have.**

We are not without guidance. Judaism has great lessons to help us live a good life—a life that gives us the feeling of security, happiness and fulfillment.

I want to highlight three principles of Jewish tradition that guide our quest for a good life. Maybe even three principles that will be good for everyone to adopt in today's economy.

- 1 Enjoy the good things in life—while you're alive
- 2 Moderation is always good
- 3 It's not about doing well, it's about doing good

One of my favorite t-shirts is a reebok shirt that reads: Life's short, Play hard. There have been plenty

of times throughout this past year when we have been reminded that life is short. Life is **too** short. Too short to hold a grudge. Too short to worry. Too short to play it safe. Too short to work all day. *Heck, life is too short to drink bad beer!* We could each come up with our own best ending for this slogan! While I have met a few people who have come to the conclusion that they lived a good, long life and were ready to die; more often than not, we want more time. There was more to do, there was more to say, there were unfulfilled dreams and unrealized plans. And that is the sad truth of life more often than not.

The Book of Ecclesiastes or Kohelet, takes up this sad truth and its author investigates the ways to live a good life and find the meaning of life in the face of the inevitable, in the face of death. Kohelet tries to find lasting happiness and unending fulfillment in a number of pursuits but he soon realizes that no matter what we do and no matter what we accomplish, in the end we are all equalized by the experience of death. He proclaims over and over again—*hakol hevel*—all is futile and the pursuit of wind.

Kohelet warns us that the lover of money never has his fill and that no matter what we gain in this world, we leave the world as we came into it, naked and carrying nothing. According to Ecclesiastes: He who dies with the most toys...is still dead.

While there is a sense of great despair at the acknowledgement of suffering and loss in life, there is also a great wisdom offered by Kohelet. Although the pursuit of wealth and power does not bring us relief from the fate of all humanity, Kohelet does not go to extremes and counsel poverty or asceticism. Rather, we are encouraged to enjoy the good things in life because God gave us the ability.

“Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy; for your action was long ago approved by God...Enjoy happiness with someone you love, all the fleeting days of life that have been granted to you under the sun...”

Ecclesiastes looks over life and sees there is great suffering to be found on earth and so there must be an enjoyment of life's pleasures when they are available to us...otherwise, we are squandering God's gifts. We don't know when we will die, so while we are here we should be using our time well, enjoying what we have, learning what we can, seeking to understand what we can and accepting what we cannot understand.

What have you been blessed with? Do you live your life in a way that you enjoy what you have? Or are you constantly looking at others, trying to have what they have, desiring a different life, and doing nothing with the gifts you have?

How many of us struggle through the challenges of life alone, hesitating to ask for help, because we think that is expected of us...missing out on the gift of friendship and support?

How many of us eat all of our meals on the run, so that we can not even remember how something tasted ten minutes after we inhaled it?

How many of us spend our time with family thinking about work, with our hand on the Blackberry, with our earpieces setup and ready to take the next call that must be more important than whatever we might be doing?

Life is too short to run through it, to not enjoy it, to work so hard that we have no energy for our loved ones. Life is too short so we need to play hard, eat slowly, dance more often—whether someone's

looking or not—sit with our loved ones and enjoy the sunset.

I imagine that many of us take the opportunity of the New Year to make some new year's resolutions. As we do our cheshbon ha-nefesh, as we make an accounting of our soul and try to find the areas in which we have fallen short, there are probably more than a few of us who stand at U'netaneh Tokef or Kol Nidre and promise that this year we will.....you fill in the blank.

Well, often, just like those secular new year's resolutions, our Rosh HaShanah resolutions get lost in a few months, maybe even a few weeks! It is difficult to make changes. It is difficult to break bad habits. And, what we often do is move from one extreme to another. Think of the most popular diets—they have you cut out a common section of any person's diet like carbohydrates. Short term you might be able to sustain this but over time, the diet becomes oppressive. The best of the diets on the market help us learn how to eat anything in the proper portion, not too much and not too little.

The golden rule of moderation is the key to the good life according to Maimonides. Maimonides, or Rambam, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish rabbi, philosopher, and doctor prescribed the middle path for health in our physical, social and spiritual lives.

The right way, he teaches, is the middle course in every one of [humanity's] tendencies...The Sages of old have therefore recommended that [an individual] should always keep estimating his tendencies, calculating and directing them into the middle course...

If we are constantly vigilant we can live a life of balance, guided by the virtues of moderation and directed towards good deeds. Maimonides explains that for every virtue we can tend toward an extreme of excess or an extreme of deficiency.

Liberality is the mean between miserliness and extravagance;  
Courage, between recklessness and cowardice;  
Dignity, between haughtiness and loutishness;  
Humility, between arrogance and self-abasement;  
Contentedness, between avarice and slothful indifference;  
Gentleness, between irascibility and insensibility to shame and disgrace;

Bringing it back to our own lives and the topics of much of our resolutions, let's look at eating, exercising and working. We eat too much—our bellies ache, our waistband expands; We don't eat enough—we become malnourished and wasted.

We exercise too much—we lose our energy and injure ourselves; we don't exercise enough—our muscles atrophy and we are weakened. We work too much—we become exhausted and inefficient; we don't work at all and we lose our skills. It's certainly not easy this thing called living, but we know when it's good, when we aren't suffering one extreme or the other...

Maimonides warns us that the most common error is to mistake one of the extremes as a good and elevate it to a virtue. In America we have done this and we are suffering the consequences. We have pursued the biggest and best of everything, often living beyond our means as individuals and as a nation. We are suffering in our pocketbooks and bank accounts, we are suffering in stock market, we are suffering in ways we can't even know yet as our actions have damaging consequences for future generations. What happened? We stopped calculating the middle path. We got lured into thinking that the extreme was the norm. We stopped thinking about the long-term implications of our actions.

If you are thinking that this doesn't apply to you, the decisions that created this economic disaster were beyond my power, let's look at something we can all connect with—and seems to have become a subtheme of my sermon—food.

Over the summer I read a few books that really started me thinking differently about the food we eat. What do we **really** need to sustain ourselves? Where **does** our food come from? Do we really need all that is offered to us in the markets nowadays and is it all really good for us?

I have come to believe that we have mistaken quantity for quality in the supermarket aisles. In her book "*Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*" Barbara Kingsolver challenges us to rethink what we really need for our sustenance and what are the truly good food decisions for our bodies, our taste buds, our environment and our conscience. We have become accustomed to what Kingsolver calls the "botanically outrageous condition" of having as much of any fruit or vegetable that we want at any season of the year. The extreme of choice and selection came to be viewed as good and has driven the food industry out of control.

We eat asparagus, baby spinach and berries in the winter with no thought to how much fuel was used to produce and transport them to our grocery stores. And, we don't even realize any more how they are supposed to taste, when they are fresh and in season, and what kind of pesticides are used in their production. We have become accustomed to consuming large quantities of meat and poultry without any thought to how the animals are treated, how they are slaughtered, not to mention how the environment is impacted by the industry and how the people are treated who labour in the fields and factories to harvest the crops and deliver those boneless, kosher chicken breasts at bargain prices.

In the book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, Kingsolver tells of moving her family to a farm in Virginia and decided to eat only that food that was produced in the same place where they "worked, loved [their] neighbors, drank the water, and breathed the air."

While it sounds like a decision driven by the extreme, listen to how Kingsolver describes it: "I enjoy denial as much as the next person, but this isn't rocket science: our kids will eventually have to make food differently. They could be assisted by some familiarity with how vegetables grow from seeds, how animals grow on pasture, and how whole ingredients can be made into meals, gee whiz, right in the kitchen...We hoped to prove—at least to ourselves—that a family living on or near green land need not depend for its life on industrial food. We were writing our own Dear John letter to a roomie that smells like exhaust fumes and the feedlot."

"We hoped a year away from industrial foods would taste *so good*, we might actually enjoy it... Doing the right thing, in this case, is not about abstinence-only, throwing out bread, tightening your belt, wearing a fake leather belt, or dragging around feeling righteous and gloomy. Food is the rare moral arena in which ethical choice is generally the one more likely to make you groan with pleasure. Why resist that?"

This past summer the nation became aware of the unethical and illegal practices of the nation's largest producer of kosher meat. Agriprocessors in Postville, Iowa, was raided by the Federal government in an immigration raid that ended up yielding testimony regarding underage workers, dangerous conditions, sexual harassment and extortion committed by the employees of the plant owned and run by the powerful Rubashkin family. The more I read, the more I became disgusted with the company

and ashamed of an industry—the kosher meat industry—that could announce that its concern was whether the meat was properly slaughtered and that any other circumstance were the responsibility of others to oversee.

Shame on Rubashkins, but also shame on us. A few years ago, kosher chickens arrived on the shelves at least two dollars a pound less than the other kosher labels. We didn't question. I, like many of my friends, leaped at the opportunity to save money and never asked how they could bring a product to market at such a great savings. Jewish tradition teaches us to be mindful of what we eat and follow the dietary guidelines laid out in the Torah and we are also taught that we must pursue justice and not oppress the stranger or the laborer.

What I AM proud of is the Conservative movement's leadership in the development of a justice certification—the Hekhsher Tzedek--that will join the kashrut certification on a food label—showing our commitment to the Jewish dietary laws and the laws of justice. The Hekhsher Tzedek will certify that this company treats its employees well, provides them with benefits, does not mistreat the animals or harm the environment and is transparent in all its business practices.

Whether you keep kosher now...on you don't keep kosher, yet!....

This is an important reminder for all of us.

Can't we all be more mindful about what we put in our grocery carts, what practices we are willing to support, what kind of food we are willing to eat?

Kashrut is not just blind observance of the laws as interpreted by rabbis past. It is the everyday practice of being attentive to what we eat and where it has come from.

I hope you will join me and the Board of Trustees who have put their support behind the Hekhsher Tzedek.

I hope you will consider joining me in purchasing Kosher Organic Local meat—beef or lamb—through our synagogue and the next order will be in November.

There are plenty of options and alternatives available for our consumption. Let's remember not to be driven merely by impulses or blinded by habit. Let us remember the values we hold dear: Kindness to others; kindness to animals and care for the environment; commitment to God's laws and the pursuit of justice; and an appreciation of God's gifts of Creation.

We need to enjoy the good things in life, but only in moderation. Too much of a good thing is no good at all. And we can run the risk of mistaking quantity for quality. The good life, in the end, cannot solely be about consumption and enjoyment. The world is not only here for our sustenance and pleasure. We were put on this earth with a sacred mission—to be God's partners in creation, to care for the earth, to watch over its creatures, and protect all those who are vulnerable.

In the last book of the Torah, as Moses is reviewing the history of Israel's development from a ragged band of slaves to a nation joined in a covenant with God, he lays out a vision of life in the Land of Israel. The food will be good and flow freely from the land, and the Children of Israel will lack nothing. But Moses warns us:

When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to lie in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything your own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God...and you say to yourselves, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me." Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth,...(

Deut.8:12-14, 17-18a)

The purpose of our wealth is not only for our own enjoyment, but we have a responsibility that comes with our blessings. What does God demand of us? Moses asks and answers. “Only this: to love and revere the Lord your God, to walk only in God’s paths, keeping the mitzvot/ God’s commandments...” What does it mean to follow God’s path? Moses doesn’t leave the matter up for debate. He tells us straightaway. Just as God is strong and powerful, fair and just, so too we must be.

We must look around the world and not only find the things that can please us; we must not only realize our blessings and thank God for our gifts; we must look around the world for those who are less fortunate than we and we must help them. We must reach out and take care of the widow and the orphan and, lest you think that we are only supposed to take care of our own people, we are reminded, over and over again in the Torah, that we must take care of the stranger, providing him with food and clothing--for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. We should understand what it means to be the oppressed, to be the minority, to be the vulnerable immigrant easily abused and in need of protection.

In the end, a good life is not about doing well, it is about doing good. We need to find balance in our lives so that we can devote our lives to doing good, to following God’s laws, to doing mitzvot, to bringing sanctity into our lives and into the lives of others, to fighting for justice and defending the weak. When we can enjoy the blessings of a good life, and know that we are helping others enjoy them as well, then we have found that elusive quality of life.

In the end, the most important things in our lives, the things that make our lives good, are not really things at all. They are the people who make our lives worth living—the people we love, the people we enjoy life with and the people we care for; the people we davven with and the people we work with to feed and shelter the poor. What makes our lives good are the teachings that inspire us to: Enjoy the good things in life, always in moderation so we can do good in the world. What offers us quality of life are the beautiful traditions and teachings of Judaism that remind us of the necessities of life—the importance of celebrating life, honoring death, and enjoying God’s blessings with all the breath we have.

May this year be a year of blessings for all of us and our loved ones.

May this year be the year that we celebrate life, love and joy.

May this year be the year when your candidate wins and our country is strengthened.

L’shanah Tovah!

[ENDING]As the markets are in turmoil, as gas and grocery prices continue to rise and the outlook of our retirement plans is in question, many of us are asking ourselves— How will we get by? What do we need to survive? What do we *really* need—to be happy, safe, fulfilled?

In Jules Verne's novel *The Mysterious Island*, he tells of five men who escape a Civil War prison camp by hijacking a hot air balloon.

As they rise into the air, they realize the wind is carrying them over the ocean. Watching their homeland disappear on the horizon, they wonder how much longer the balloon can stay aloft. As the hours pass and the surface of the ocean draws closer, the men decide they must cast overboard some of the weight, for they had no way to heat the air in the balloon. Shoes, overcoats, and weapons are reluctantly discarded, and the uncomfortable aviators feel their balloon rise. But only temporarily.

Soon they find themselves dangerously close to the waves again, so they toss their food. Better to be high and hungry than drown on a full belly! Unfortunately, this, too, is only a temporary solution, and the craft again threatens to lower the men into the sea. One man has an idea: they can tie the ropes that hold the passenger car and sit on those ropes. Then they can cut away the basket beneath them. As they sever the very thing they had been standing on, it drops into the ocean, and the balloon rises.

Not a minute too soon, they spot land. Eager to stand on terra firma again, the five jump into the water and swim to the island. They live, spared because they were able to discern the difference between what was really needed and what was not. The “necessities” they once thought they couldn't live without were the very weights that almost cost them their lives.