

### The Jewish Bucket List

Today, it is clear that God is also the star of Yom Kippur--just like at Rosh Hashanah. However, there is another theme that runs through the holiest day of the Jewish calendar and it's just as or even more uncomfortable to talk about than God.

Do you know what it is? I'm talking about death.

Think about it for a minute. The whole idea of Yom Kippur is to play dead. It's a ritual near-death experience. Traditionally, we don't eat; we don't drink; we don't bathe; we don't have intimate relations with our loved ones. These are all actions that are part of living. They promote life. In addition, many of us wear white. As you can see, I'm wearing a *kittel* which is what I will be buried in. White is the color of purity and that of Jewish burial shrouds.

We also talk about death--"Who shall live and who shall die." Yom Kippur is called *yom ha-din*, the Day of Judgment. On Rosh Hashanah the Book of Life is opened and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. God now knows who among us is going to make it to the next High Holy Days. This is a sobering thought.

And finally, wherever we look in the *mahzor* we see constant reminders of death. We read about Jewish martyrs throughout our people's history. We come together for the biggest Yizkor service of the year. And we recite the *vidui*. This prayer is said today and on our deathbeds. It is our final confession to God.

Yom Kippur is a pretty heavy day and I've said nothing of the marathon-like services.

In reflecting about what message to take away from this topic, I instinctively thought about ethical wills, advance directives, and other necessary things we can do to actively prepare ourselves and our loved ones for our last days.

However, I was seeking for another way we can prepare for your own death. I wanted to find a more Jewish specific and lighter topic if possible. I was reminded of a 2007 film starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman called, "The Bucket List." In this heartfelt comedy, two terminally ill men with lung cancer befriend each other in the hospital and decide to go on an adventure together with a wish list of things they'd both like to do before they "kick the bucket." Some of the items on their list which they eventually check off are: skydiving, visit the Taj Mahal, go on safari, visit the pyramids, help a complete stranger for the good, and kiss the most beautiful girl in the world.

I think about my own bucket list from time to time. I would love to visit Japan and eat at *Sukiyabashi Jiro Sushi* in Tokyo. I would love to go to Thailand, Australia, New Zealand

and India. I would love to play a whole bunch of songs on my ukulele. I would love to finish a mosaic I began years ago. I'd like to go to Cooperstown. I'd like to go swimming with whale sharks. I'd like to hike the John Muir Trail.

I imagine some of you have created your own bucket lists as well. I was actually surprised to find many websites dedicated to creating these lists. Some of the first sites that pop up when you google "bucket list" are: "10,000 things to do before you die," "101 Things To Do Before You Die," "Get some great bucket list ideas, they may change your life," and "Bucket List--Share your life list and get help in fulfilling it!"

People take bucket lists pretty seriously. Some are actually pretty funny too. I read one that said, "I want to get in a taxi and yell, 'Follow that car!'"

While making a bucket list is a worthy activity and one that we should do, perhaps all of us should have a second bucket list as well--a Jewish bucket list.

A few years ago, I served on the interview committee of Hebrew Union College, my rabbinical school. I remember one interviewer, a rabbi and professor, asking a young applicant what he thinks Reform Jews ought to do? In other words, my teacher was asking the very nervous man what are some things that every Reform Jew should be expected to do, knowing full well that many Jews pick and choose the rituals and customs they wish to practice. Should each person, my teachers followed up, observe shabbat, go to a seder, study Torah?

And this question has stayed with me ever since. Are there certain things all Jews, or at least, all Reform and Conservative Jews should try to do before they die?

I have come up with such a list, though I am hesitant to say that any group of Jews should adopt it. I certainly can not say that any or all Jews ought to fulfill these tasks before they die. Some of the items I have already checked off myself and others I hope to one day. I encourage you to borrow from my list or adapt it to fit your life. I imagine it will be edited many times too. But these items are ones that I currently feel are at the essence of what it means to be a Jew living in the modern world.

First, a little background about my process. Early on I realized that there needed to be some structure to it, unlike my secular bucket list. And what eventually informed my list was Mordecai Kaplan's idea of Judaism being a civilization and not simply a religion. Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism and author of *Judaism as a Civilization* believed that the religion of Judaism was just one aspect of the whole and a small one at that. I agree. To him, "A civilization is the organic unity of the people and its

land, its language, its literature, its mores, its folkways, its laws, its sanctions, its arts, its religion--in sum, the social forms through which a folk expresses itself.”<sup>1</sup>

Since this is the lens through which I view Judaism, I have broken my list into various categories, including many of the ones mentioned by Kaplan.

Once again, this list is my attempt to create a bucket list of all the Jewish activities I think one should try to engage in at some point in his/her life. But by no means is it meant to be prescriptive. It is also not an exhaustive list either. For the sake of your time today, this is a condensed version.

## Land

\*Visit Israel. Israel is the birthplace of the Jewish people. To wake up in a country that is set to Jewish time, see people walking around with *kippot* and shops with Hebrew on the awnings is extraordinary. It's nice to feel like part of the majority for a change too. Though it's halfway around the world, it will feel like home. We are blessed to live in an age when there is a Jewish state which pulses with a vibrant Jewish life. Israel is beautiful, ancient, mysterious, complex, and a light unto other nations in many regards. Each year we say, "Next year in Jerusalem." May our actions back up our words. It is also my hope to lead a congregational trip in the next few years. Perhaps many of you will then be able to check this off your lists.

\*Go to an Israel festival or rally and wave the flag. We should feel proud to be Jewish, to be who we are. Nothing says that more than showing outward support for our homeland.

\*Visit Auschwitz and Majdanek. In the span of just a few years, the Jewish people witnessed the greatest horror and tragedy in modern times as well as greatest collective achievement. Many of our relatives perished in the Shoah and a few survived. Sadly, our youth today do not grasp the weight which we feel from our recent past. Visiting Auschwitz, with a survivor if possible, will allow us to bear witness and explain to others what our people experienced. It will sensitize us to suffering elsewhere in the world as well.

I mention Majdanek, because unlike Auschwitz and many other camps, this death camp was and is still situated within the boundaries of a major city. It is also the most well-preserved of all the concentration camps.

\*On these same lines: Spend time talking to a survivor. It's now or never.

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<sup>1</sup> Borowitz, Eugene, ed. *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought*. Behrman House. (West Orange, 1995). p. 104

\*Visit towns in Europe, or elsewhere, where your family came from. For many of us here that might mean visiting Lithuania. I hope to trace my family roots there someday.

\*Visit some of the great synagogues from the 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe. They are magnificent architectural specimens which will never be copied. Standing in one will fill you with awe.

### History

\*Learn when the two temples were destroyed and by whom.

\*Read about the origins, struggles, triumphs and personalities of Zionism.

### Language

\*Familiarize yourself some yiddish phrases. The Yiddish language is a wonderful source of rich expressions, especially terms of endearment. This was once one of the most widespread conversational languages of the Jewish people and has since nearly died and been revived. Some things in life can only be expressed with a yiddish word or phrase. So learn a *bissel*.

\*Learn the *aleph-bet* to the point where you can follow along comfortably in the *siddur*. You will experience prayer and texts with greater depth.

\*Memorize the *Hatikvah*, our national anthem which speaks of the historic yearning for a return to the Land of Israel.

### Literature

\*Attend a year's worth of Torah study. We don't *read* the Hebrew bible alone, we *study* it with others. The Torah tells the story of our people, it teaches us values and studying it connects us with our tradition.

\*Study another sacred Jewish text such as Mishnah, Talmud, midrash, Zohar, Rashi, etc. The Torah is really the "clif notes" version of the whole *megillah*. Not only will you find wisdom, but humor, spirituality, logic and ethical teachings in these texts. If you want brain stimulation, you'll get it here.

\*Read something by Abraham Joshua Heschel. This is a man who urged Jews to take a leap of action and not thought, to encounter God not through repetitiveness but through moments of awe and wonder and to view Shabbat as a palace in time. If the book of prophets in the Hebrew bible was still open, I have no doubt he would make it in there.

\*Familiarize yourself with Rashi and Maimonides. They are the giants of Jewish thought, textual commentary and so much more.

\*Read *Exodus* by Leon Uris.

\*Read *As a Driven Leaf* by Milton Steinberg.

\*Read *Night* by Elie Weisel.

\*Read *The Last of the Just* by André Shwarz-Bart

### **Community**

\*Help fund the building of a Jewish community. My grandfather built a shul in Fargo, North Dakota. I hope my descendants will one day say with pride, "My great-grandfather helped build a shul in Bellingham."

\*Serve in a leadership capacity in your Jewish community. And support those that do already.

\*Get involved in a social action project that moves you personally. As Isaiah said, "Is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies?...No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness...to let the oppressed go free...to share your bread with the hungry..."<sup>2</sup>

### **Laws/Mitzvot**

\*Keep kosher for a month. While this is no more important than any other mitzvah (in my mind), eating Jewishly is a pretty central concern for many Jews worldwide. My teacher Lawrence Kushner wrote, "Look, I don't know if God cares about what I eat, but I know that I feel closer to God when I care about what I eat."<sup>3</sup>

\*Hang a mezuzah and kiss it when you pass by. This is just another daily reminder informing us who we are, where we come from and that the universe is much bigger than ourselves.

\*Toss earth on a casket. It's a mitzvah.

\*Give blood and be donor. The Talmud teaches that whoever saves one life it is as if he saved the entire world.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 58:5-7

<sup>3</sup> Kushner, Lawrence. *I'm God, You're Not*. Jewish Lights. (Woodstock, 2010) p. 84

\*Give *tzedakah* on a consistent basis. Give it anonymously. And give to an anonymous recipient.

\*Teach someone how to swim. Teach someone a trade.

### **Arts**

\*Visit Chagall's stained glass windows at Hadassah University Medical Center. The light that emanates from the twelve windows bathes the synagogue in a special glow.

\*Listen to Jackie Mason's old stand up. He'll have you in stitches with his yiddishisms.

\*Listen to klezmer music. It will have you dancing, crying and it will transport you back in time.

\*Watch Israeli films. One of the best ways to learn about real life in Israel is to watch movies made there.

\*Hang Jewish art in your home. Whenever I've had the honor of sitting on a *beit din* for conversation students one question which always get asked of them is: "If someone were to enter your home, how would they know it was a Jewish home?"

### **Foods**

\*Learn to braid and bake challah. It really is the best kind of bread and anyone in your house will thank you.

\*Go to an old time Jewish deli and order something with a name like "The triple bypass."

\*Learn how to make your mother's brisket or other holiday dish and then teach someone else how to make it. You can get my mom's recipe after the service. She's up in front.

### **Religion**

\*Celebrate shabbat at a Shlomo Carlebach style minyan. The joy, energy, and infectious melodies might change the way you approach shabbat. I hope to lead one service a month in this manner sometime during my time here.

\*Become an adult *b'nei mitzvah*. One is never too old to re-affirm his/her Jewish identity through leading a community in prayer and study.

\*Chant your *b'nei mitzvah* torah portion each year.

\*Make serious *teshuva*. Judaism allows us to press the rewind button every year. This is a true gift.

\*Step out of your comfort zone at Purim. Go nuts.

### **Rituals**

\*Mark a transition in your life by stepping into the *mikvah*. Jews have been doing this for over 2000 years.

\*Build a *sukkah* at your home. Judaism wants us to appreciate the outdoors and all the beauty around us.

\*Abstain from all electronics for one shabbat. Unplug, disconnect and just be. Shabbat--a day of rest--is one of the greatest gifts our tradition has given us.

\*Lead a seder. It's not hard and it can be a lot of fun.

\*Wrap *tefillin* at least once. I'm not suggesting you become Orthodox, but praying with our sacred texts on your arm and forehead will give you a greater sense of *kavanah*, or intention when you pray. It's hard to think about the grocery list when you're praying with *tefillin* on.

Yom Kippur can be a challenging day for many of us. Regardless of how we connect to it specifically, or to Judaism in general, let us take this season to examine our Jewish identity and the way we practice our beautiful heritage. May each of us begin to check items off of our own Jewish bucket lists this year. And may each activity bring us closer to our roots, each other and to God. May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life. Amen