

My friends, one of my great passions in life is photography. I wish I could show you my camera—it looks old-fashioned because it uses real buttons and dials more than menus like most digital cameras. None the less, it is a complex machine and there are times when, despite knowing my camera well, I have to pull out the instruction book.

Sometimes, the instruction book is not enough. It might tell me how to activate a certain function, for example, but not explain when or why I should do so. For that, I have to go to another book, one that does not replace the instruction book but adds the whens and the whys. You might say that the instruction book gives me knowledge, and the second book gives me wisdom. I wouldn't argue with that.

So allow me to suggest, my friends, that life is more complex than my camera. If I need instructions for my camera, I need instructions for life, both in the form of knowledge and wisdom. And just like I need a second book on my camera, life also needs a supplement, one that can literally be life changing. That is what I want to talk to you about tonight.

Let's begin with a true story. You have heard of the famous writer Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. He was driving to give a talk on

a freezing winter night when he got a flat tire. The wait for someone to change the tire was too long, so Rabbi Telushkin tried to change it himself. I'. Actually not sure how it was finally resolved, but I do know that he missed his speaking engagement, disappointed an audience, lost a paycheck, and in general had a miserable night. Anyone could understand him being frustrated and angry, but the next day he said, "I am convinced that each of us has a flat tire quota. I had never had a flat tire before."

Why didn't his terrible night upset him? How could he take it in stride? I am convinced, my friends, that something that is indispensable for a happy life is have a philosophy of life that allows you to have perspective. That is the potentially life changing bottom line. Perspective.

Please do not think that perspective is my way of saying that compared to the suffering in the world, your troubles pale in significance, so keep a stiff upper lip. Nothing could be farther from my point. It is just the opposite. It is because your pain is real, because bad things do happen to good people, because we do have a certain amount of flat tires in our lives. Sometimes they are catastrophic, and rarely are they fair.

But consider this, my friends. Most of us are among the very few in human history to whom life being easy is the default. We expect it. We work to make it even easier. If our cell phones are not syncing our emails correctly, we are having a bad day. Just at least recognize our tendency to expect that life will be pain free, and God willing it will be most of the time, and appreciate that this has not been the case for most of the people who have ever lived. That is a first step toward perspective.

My own next building block in my world view: I've seen that there is no correlation between the circumstances of one's life and how happy one is. We've all seen that some people who are materially blessed are fundamentally unhappy, and we've seen others who have relatively little materially but always have a smile on their faces. Of course, the reverse is also true. But it is undeniably true that we do always have one choice in life that no one can take away, and that is how we react to the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

There is a famous story told about King Solomon. He asked a jeweler to fashion him a magic ring. The ring had to cheer him up when he was feeling down, and sober him when he got too happy. The jeweler had a perspective on life, and he was

successful in fulfilling his task because of that perspective. What kind of ring could cheer King Solomon up when he was feeling down, and sober him when he got too happy? A ring engraved with the words *gam zu ya'avor*—this too shall pass.

This too shall pass—the knowledge that most difficult situations come to an end is a perspective that has help a great many people weather life's storms. No pun intended—my sons and many friends are now dealing with the aftermath of Ian, some dealing with true devastation and loss. But even for them, the words are true. No, it won't be easy, but life is not inherently easy, and it might take a long time, but yes, even this will pass. *Gam zu ya'avor.*

We come to the toughest of all. If you are sitting here listening to me tonight, you probably have a belief in God, however you define God. But I'm going to make some assumptions. I assume you believe that God is good, and I assume you believe that God is not powerless. If these assumptions are true, we have to deal with a problem. God allows unjust suffering.

There are three possible explanations for this. One is that God could prevent human suffering but chooses not to. Next is

that God's power is real but not limitless, so God does the best He can but cannot prevent all unjust suffering. The third possibility is that God is indeed powerless, at least in this regard. But the fascinating thing to me today is that I do not so much care about telling you my own perspective as I care about asking you to decide what you believe before you are in crisis, because all three acknowledge the same fundamental truth that is essential to our perspectives on life: for too many of us, life includes undeserved suffering.

Finally, we come to the ultimate irony of life, death itself. Ironic because what was the result of, in the words of Genesis, humanity becoming like divine beings who know good and evil? We learned that we are going to die. We became the only one of God's creatures who live with the knowledge that our days are finite. Is knowledge of our eventual demise a blessing or a curse? Honestly, I don't think it matters. I believe that every blessing has its curse and every curse has its blessing. We know we are not going to live forever, and to that, my friends, I have two responses.

The first is that knowing that we have a limited number of days, we are probably less likely to waste the precious

commodity of time. I say this fearing it will sound like a platitude or a cliché. But in fact, it is ancient wisdom. It is sacred Scripture. Psalm 90, a heartfelt religious poem about the eternity of God and the mortality of humanity, tells us,

לְמַנּוֹת יְמֵינוּ כֵּן הוֹדַע אֲנִי לְבַב חֲכָמָה:—*Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*¹ Every day is a sacred gift. Stop and appreciate each and every one.

My second response was said perfectly by C.S. Lewis, “You do not have a soul. You are a soul. You have a body.” He was saying that we are not primarily physical beings who hunger for the occasional spiritual experience. We are primarily spiritual beings, souls if you will, going through a powerful but temporary physical experience. When it is over, we return to our original spiritual state.

This might sound a lot like I’m talking about life after death. Well, of course I am. Who else is going to talk to you about it?

First, let’s be logical. Judaism teaches that God exists. Judaism also teaches that God has no physical body. To me, it defies all logic and reason to assume that a non-physical God

¹ Ps. 90:12

only created a physical world. Judaism also teaches that God is just. If that is true, there must be ultimate justice in another life, because there certainly is not ultimate justice in this one. But let's go back to the existence of a non-physical God. If that is true, it means there is a non-physical plane of existence. Some people are happy calling it heaven, some are more comfortable with the traditional Jewish phrase the World to Come, but it all means the same thing. A few years ago, I shared with you a scientific, medical study that concluded "consciousness survives the body." What Dr. Jeffrey Long called consciousness I call the soul. I believe that because we live in a time when people are revived from clinical death, that we are among the first people in human history to know about near death experiences and the reassuring messages that these stories bring. This world is not all there is, my friends. In fact, do you know what the Talmud says is the difference between this world and the World to Come? It says that in this world there is a blessing for hearing good news and another for hearing bad news. In the World to Come, says the Talmud, there is only the blessing over good. The World to Come is a place of total goodness. A big part of my perspective on life is my belief that a better world awaits us.

My friends, tomorrow is a day of prayer, but I urge you to make it a day of reflection and contemplation as well. Pay attention to the prayerbook, but also give yourself time with yourself. Use the surroundings to your advantage. You are in a holy place. The sacred words of our Jewish liturgy will be in the air. It is a holy day. The circumstances could not be more conducive to reflection.

What I have tried to do tonight, and what I will do again tomorrow, is share with you some of my personal spiritual practices and challenges in the hope that they might help you to enhance your own spiritual lives. I believe that part of what connects spirituality with real life is developing a philosophy of life, one that gives you a sense of perspective. Like my camera I spoke about earlier, life is not simple. Like me when I need help with my camera, we need someplace to turn when confronted with the challenges of life. My hope is that by developing your own philosophy and perspective, one place you will be able to turn to in the face of adversity is yourself.

With that, my friends, I wish you a *tzom kal*, an easy fast, but also a *tzom kol mashmanti* a meaningful fast. Gut yuntiff.