

It's always fascinating to me when a term or concept catches fire, when a word we had never heard before is suddenly everywhere: "bling," "tipping point," "truthiness." This happens when a word or phrase so perfectly captures something people are thinking or feeling – the *zeitgeist*, to use a 19th century example of the same phenomenon – that it's suddenly ubiquitous. One of those terms, and one I've been turning over a lot in my mind recently, is 'bucket list' from the 2007 movie by the same name. It refers to a list of goals or aspiration a person wants to accomplish before they 'kick the bucket,' hence the term. In the movie, Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman play men facing terminal cancer diagnoses, and their illness propels them to think about what they would like to do with their brief remaining time. But in the years since, the term's popularity has exploded even as its meaning has become attenuated. A bucket list is no longer just for people with limited time who are trying to set priorities and goals to make the last portion of their lives more meaningful, but has become simply a wish-list of things a person wants to do, see, and taste – and this is crucial – before he or she dies. It's in this sense that the term has really taken off and it's this aspect – the intersection of a wish-list with an awareness of our own mortality – that has made it truly fascinating to me.

How is the bucket list different from a straightforward wish list? I think it's that by invoking our mortality the bucket list goes from being just a bunch of things we want to do, to becoming an organizing principle that adds purpose to our lives and reveals something about who we truly are. At least that's how the book *The Bucket List Just for Me*, subtitled *I Really Lived!*, puts it in its introduction:

THE PURPOSE OF THE BUCKET LIST SERIES 1. To help you decide what you want to do before you die 2. To help you take action and make things happen 3. To help you write about your journey so the world knows what you've done and how you chose to REALLY LIVE! "By recording your dreams and goals on paper, you set in motion the process of becoming the person you most want to be."

There's something powerful and compelling in this phrasing: *really living*. It implies that having a bucket list will help us live life to its fullest... and leaves us with the nagging suspicion that we might not be living our best lives right now. It's an idea that's certainly lies at the heart of the movie: in its opening words, Freeman's character speaks about Nicholson's in a voice over: "It's difficult to understand the sum of a person's life. Some people will tell you it's measured by the ones left behind... some say by love... What I can tell you for sure is that, by any measure, Edward Cole lived more in his last days on earth than most people manage to wring out of a lifetime."

Wringing more out of life – who wouldn't want that? After all, we only get one time around and we don't want to blow it! And so a whole bucket list cottage industry has popped up to help people form and articulate their life goals. There's literally hundreds of books and websites to help you craft a sufficiently enticing list: There's *The Big Bucket List: 133 Experiences of a Lifetime*, *The Bucket List for Couples*, *The Film Buff's Bucket List* (subtitled 50 movies of the 2000's to see before you die), a novel (at least I hope it's a novel!) called *Murder on the Bucket List* (actually, it's the first in the Bucket List Mystery series), and *The Complete Santa Fe Bucket List* (important, because I'd hate to have the incomplete version of that one). For kids there's also *Judy Moody and the Bucket List* (pitched at a 2nd-grade reading level), for teens there's *The Teenage Bucket List: 250 things to do before you turn 18* (no pressure!) and, for adults, there are several Bucket List-related books whose titles would *not* be appropriate to share from the bimah. Everywhere we turn, there are pre-made lists offering us guidance

on how to fill our lives with excitement, adventure, and self-realization so we can find fulfillment before we finally kick the bucket.

On the surface there's nothing really wrong with that. But the issue I have with the bucket list approach is the underlying assumption that *acquiring* and *accomplishing* is the way we live life to its fullest, the way we give it direction and purpose. Now I certainly don't mean to suggest that articulating and writing down some tangible goals can't have its benefits – although if we need to look at lists in a book to help us figure out what we *should* want to do to make our lives most fulfilled, we might possibly be missing the point. But the bucket list is a perfect fit for our society, where we too often measure worth in accumulation and value in acquisition – of objects and experiences. As humans we thirst for direction and purpose and can often feel adrift about how we should behave to make our lives worthwhile, so the lists end up serving as proxies for just how fulfilled we are, or are supposed to be. And since the simple gratification of our own desires seems like a shallow organizing principle for our lives, we connect the list to our mortality so we can elevate the idea of 'living life to its fullest' as an end in and of itself, together with the comforting idea that making a list is a vehicle for taking charge of our choices in life instead of simply letting them happen to us.

Now, actually, I have nothing against living life to its fullest, although my personal definition isn't rooted in luxury cars and hang gliding. I think we actually *should* pay attention to how we want to live our richest, fullest lives and, this being the High Holidays, I have some thoughts about how we can actually do that. But I don't think it's a bucket list. For one thing, a bucket list – or any list we make – is about measuring what's crossed off the list against what's still on it. Instead of focusing on appreciating and enjoying the experiences we're having, both big and small, a list puts us in a framework of cataloguing and counting: 'Check, I've done that.' The bucket list, it seems to me is, or at least can be, driven less by the things we've already done than the things we haven't yet done: 'Oh, I really want to get around to that, it's on my bucket list.' From this point of view the bucket list is a rigged game, an emotional losing proposition: instead of imagining ourselves starting *this high* and going up with each new wonderful and enriching experience we have, it sets us up to be *down here* because we have all these things we need to check off before we can be satisfied. In a very real sense, we are always playing catch-up with the list, running around trying to work our way through it, coming from a place of deficit, because *only* if we get to everything, only if all the items are crossed off our list, do we finally feel like we've completed what we intended, that we can be satisfied.

And this burden of tracking what experiences we've attained and which ones we haven't is compounded by a particularly modern-day preoccupation: FOMO, or, the Fear of Missing Out. FOMO, for the uninitiated, is that constant nagging anxiety that some amazing thing or fabulous opportunity may be happening, *right now, and you are missing it*. It's a phenomenon driven in no small part by social media, where people like to showcase themselves enjoying whatever the hottest new *it*-experience is, whether it's posting on Facebook about how amazing *Hamilton* was, Tweeting out regular updates from their fabulous vacation spots, or Instagramming a picture of their entrée from that restaurant with an eight-month list for reservations. And even for those who don't spend our lives glued to our Facebook feeds, there are simply so many sources connecting us in full-color and surround-sound to products and places and experiences we now desire or even crave. Some scientists believe there's an actual biological basis for FOMO – that an area of our brain called the amygdala is biologically primed to notice when we are being left out, because in the early days of human development not being where

the action was, not staying with the group or being aware of a new food source, could be the difference between life and death. But today, the constant monitoring of our surroundings on social media and seeing what our friends are up to is most definitely *not* necessary to our survival and may even be detrimental to our emotional health as our overstimulated amygdalae keep us in a state of hypervigilance and anxiety.

And this is where I think FOMO joins forces with our understandable and very human drive for purpose and meaning to turn itself into the bucket list – a specific, quantifiable, definitive tally that we are living, experiencing, enjoying, *enough*. As Morgan Freeman’s character puts it, wringing as much as possible out of life as a measure of how much someone has *lived*. By setting the gratification of our desires as life’s goal and the bucket list as a way of keeping track, we finally have a scorecard that lets us know where we stand, and exactly what else we need to do in order to feel fulfilled.

Now, I want to be clear. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying good things – Judaism is not an ascetic religion that equates virtue with renouncing pleasures. The Jerusalem Talmud, commenting on God’s instruction to Adam that he may eat the fruit of every tree of the Garden save the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge states: “In the world to come, a person is required to give an accounting for every opportunity that they had to enjoy this world and refrained from it.” (Y. Kiddushin 4:12). In this vein there’s a well-known story about the 19th century German leader and scholar, Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch who, near the end of his life, wanted to travel to Switzerland. His students tried to dissuade him because he was already in failing health but he said to them, “When I come before God, I will have to answer for many things. But what will I say when God asks me, ‘Shimile, have you seen My Alps?’”

And this story, I think is precisely the point. Because it embodies some important lessons about experiencing pleasure in ways that are both Jewishly grounded and emotionally healthy. From Hirsch’s point of view, seeing the Alps wasn’t just about gratifying his own desires – although, again, that can be nice – but also about acknowledgment: acknowledging the beauty of the world and, for Hirsch, of God who created it. This is the idea behind saying a blessing before we eat a bite of delicious food – to pause in acknowledgment and gratitude even as we prepare to enjoy it. But also, the story highlights the idea of *appreciation* – the notion that God wants us to acknowledge and savor the goodness in the world, and we do this by taking the time to truly acknowledge and be present to it. When I had the good fortune to travel to Japan last year I was startled over and over again by the number of tourists at this or that beautiful temple or peaceful shrine who would jockey for position with their selfie-sticks so they could get the *exact right* picture documenting that they had been to that place (and presumably were having a fabulous time) and, once the shot was completed, would turn right around to head for the next scenic photo spot without so much as a pause to take in the beauty and wonder of where they were.

All of those selfies, all of those posts, all of those page views cataloguing and bombarding us with the pursuit of experiences, pleasures, and opportunities *that other people are having* reinforce the message for the rest of us of insufficiency, of lack, of missing out – of needing to do more to live our best and fullest life. But what if we’re going about that worthy goal the wrong way? What if, in the pursuit of our best lives, we’re chasing after the wrong things? Rosh ha-Shanah, after all, is an invitation to pause, evaluate, and ask questions about our lives – not to simply keep doing things some way just because that’s what’s comfortable, what’s familiar, what we’ve always done.

Remember all those ‘bucket list’ books I mentioned earlier? This one’s simply filled with blank pages on which we’re invited to write our dreams and adventures. The empty pages in the journal make

me think of the as-yet-unwritten pages in the year that lies ahead. And they beg the question of what we will fill them with. Hopefully some adventures – that would be lovely, of course. But what if, instead of looking to fill the pages of our year with what we hope to experience or accomplish, instead of filling the pages of the New Year with what we hope to *do*, what if we filled them with how we hope to *be*? What if, instead of focusing on events and outcomes over which we have limited control, we put our energy into the cultivation and development of our behavior and attitudes, our inner qualities and our character which we can help shape and determine? Imagine, if you will, a bucket list of sorts that isn't filled with wishes of skydiving, white sand beaches, and test driving sports cars but instead sets aspirations for compassion. Generosity. Patience. Humility. Empathy. What would it be like if we set an active goal of kindness – toward our close family members, our colleagues, complete strangers. Imagine how completing – or even making progress on – *that* bucket list could radically transform our lives and our sense of purpose and meaning. What would our lives – and our *world* – look like if we were able to take steps toward the Torah's command, "*v'ahavta l're'echa kemocha*" – "You shall love your fellow human being as yourself" (Lev. 19:18)?

I should say, I spent enough time reading examples of people's bucket lists in preparation for this sermon to see that most lists do include some items that demonstrate generosity: 'Buy a cup of coffee for a total stranger.' 'Volunteer in a soup kitchen.' 'Build a house through Habitat for Humanity.' All of these, and more, are good, even wonderful, things to do. But the problem with the bucket list mentality is that it presents them as commodities, as one more experience to be acquired, one more item to be checked off the list to get to the next one. They're not really about improving the world and they're certainly not about a sustained and ongoing commitment to trying to improve who you are. And for good reason! The task of self-transformation isn't the work of a list, it's the work of this day – this day and all the ones that follow it: to truly reflect on what it is we want to fill our lives with – what qualities, not what experiences; what attributes, not what achievements; what values, not what valuables – we want to inscribe into the book of our lives.

So remember the introduction to the Bucket List Journal I read a few minutes ago:

THE PURPOSE OF THE BUCKET LIST SERIES 1. To help you decide what you want to do before you die 2. To help you take action and make things happen... set[ting] in motion the process of becoming the person you most want to be.

I love, that – I do: Setting in motion the process of becoming the person you most want to be. As long we realize we don't need to look outside ourselves, but in. In some ways, the work of these Holidays is the ultimate Bucket List – not a 'to do' list, but a 'to be' list. What we need to consider on this Rosh ha-Shanah is that fulfillment doesn't come from acquiring new things but from appreciating and caring for those things we already have: by experiencing gratitude and fostering it in others in return. By letting go of our fear of missing out on what might be going on somewhere else, and by being present to where we are right now. By forming connections, reaching out, making ourselves open and vulnerable. By realizing we are not completed by the things we accomplish in this world but rather by recognizing the fundamental fact that there is no such thing as 'completed' – that there is no end goal toward which we travel and then evaluate our success by ticking off the way-stations and seeing how far we've come, but rather by bringing intention, openness, and humility to each moment of the journey.

We stand at the beginning of a New Year, the pages of our future still unwritten. Let us strive to fill our days – and our buckets – with all the love, generosity, hope, and kindness we can possibly fit into them.