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**Sermon by Rabbi Shalom Paltiel
Delivered at Chabad of Port Washington**

Kol Nidrei Sermon 5771

Do You Have a Mission Statement?

On a Northwest Airways flight from Atlanta, GA , a well attired middle-aged woman found herself sitting next to a man wearing a yarmulka.

She called the attendant over to complain about her seating.

"What seems to be the problem, Madam?" asked the attendant. "You've sat me next to a Jew!! I can't possibly sit next to this strange man. Please find me another seat!"

"Madam, I will see what I can do to accommodate," the attendant replied, "but the flight is virtually full today and I don't know if there is another seat available."

The woman shoots a snooty look at the snubbed Jewish man beside her (not to mention the surrounding passengers).

A few minutes later the attendant returned and said, "Madam, the economy and club sections are full, however, we do have one seat in First class."

Before the lady had a chance to respond, the attendant continued, "It is only on exceptions that we make this kind of upgrade, and I had to ask permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that no one should be forced to sit next to an unpleasant person..."

The flight attendant turned to the Jewish man sitting next to her, and said:

"So if you'd like to get your things, Sir, I have a comfortable seat for you in First class..."

At this point, the surrounding passengers stood up and gave a standing ovation while the Jewish man walked up to the front of the plane.

The lady then said indignantly, "The Captain must have made a mistake.."

To which the attendant replied, "No Ma'am. Captain Cohen never makes a mistake."

As we begin our Yom Kippur journey, we're aware of our Captain, Al-Mighty G-d, who brought us all together and who carries us through this journey.

As we embark on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, when we renew our commitment and connection to our soul's purpose, I ask that we reflect on a simple question; that each of us ask one question of ourselves:

Do I have a mission statement for my life?

No successful business exists without a mission statement. Why should our own life be any different... After-all, we're here on a mission; we're here for a purpose; aren't we? Or is this life just a random accident, a biological mistake?

I often ask people: How's life going? A common answer is: Thank G-d I have my health... Now don't get me wrong, health is a very important thing, without which we can't accomplish our mission. But is that the totality of the mission?

When people give me that answer – "I have my health", I think of the guy who gets onto a cross country Amtrak train. He's riding in First Class or Business Class with countless executives all on important

business; one guy is heading to Silicon Valley, another has a thick Hollywood contract in his briefcase. Everyone is on their laptop planning the “mission” ahead; the job at hand; the purpose of the journey.

Then there’s one guy sitting there staring blankly out of the window. When asked: and what about you – where are YOU headed out West? He says simply: I don’t know... But I have my seat... I have no idea where I’m going and for what purpose... but that’s no big deal... I’ve got my seat...

Pilot gets onto PA system: I’ve got bad news and good news. The bad news is we’re lost, we have no idea where we’re going. The good news, we’re making good time...

Essentially going nowhere fast...

For the intelligent, successful people that we are, shouldn’t we figure out the basic question of where are we headed? What’s the mission of my journey through life?

A teenage boy once asked me to explain why observant Jews seem to be joyous, in spite of the rigorous requirements and restrictions placed upon them; while those living a freer, secular life with little or no restrictions seem to find joy hard to come by. Good question...

(Think about the restrictions.... If I’m in an airport and it’s breakfast time and I’m hungry. While everyone is sitting down in their favorite eatery (and there are plenty of places to choose from) I pull out my banana.... And if the flight is further delayed until lunch time, while people are busy deciding from their choices of restaurants... I’m there with my banana... Lots of rules and regulations... when to eat, what to eat...)

So how do you reconcile this?

I asked the boy if he can explain the difference between driving a car on the highway vs. driving a car in an arcade. Especially nowadays with the arcades fully loaded cars... the seat tilts with you on every curve... the "wind" blows in your hair... the police pull you over on the highway and issue a ticket... there are billboard, buildings, exits, etc. So what's the difference?

It's this: In an arcade, it's all just fun and games. As such, you can do whatever you want, because nothing really matters. You can drive against traffic if you like... you can drive into buildings and see if you come out on the other end... etc. You are TOTALLY FREE, because it is not real and nothing matters. However, if you're driving down the 495 at 60 or 70 MPH, this is real life; your every move can spell the difference between life and death – G-d forbid...

So there's the difference: If I see my life as just a game, its all fake, an accident of fate, so it's essentially like one big arcade. As one man once told me: forget the religious/purpose stuff. Life is simply an arcade, we're here to have fun. The only question is: how many quarters do I have left...

If so, I'm totally free, because nothing matters. By the same token, it's quite depressing to recognize that my life is in fact meaningless and just a random accident.

By contrast, if I recognize that my life is in fact real, that I was handcrafted by the Creator Himself, who made me unique from all the people throughout history for a unique mission. Then yes, I've got to make sure to live within very measured rules and regulations. I've got a very important mission to accomplish which affects my soul, Al-Mighty G-d and His vast eternal plan... My every move; my every deed, speech or thought, are critically important. So it's very restrictive on the one hand. But think about how uplifting and joyous the thought is to recognize that I'm real and I really matter. I'm not just an accidental turn of fate, a spec of dust in the universe of history.

Let us begin to think of ourselves as people on a mission, because that's in fact the truth. Think of people who were sent on important missions... The rescue at Entebbe.... Or the capture of Eichmann... These people were carefully selected because they had specific characteristics. German had to be their childhood language, yet their commitment to Israel and the Jewish people had to be unquestioned. Their every move was counted and measured... No freedom there... after all – they had an important mission to accomplish.

The same is true with each of us.

I was attending the wedding of Mendy Teldon, the oldest son of Rabbi Tuvia Teldon, the first Chabad rabbi on Long Island. The wedding was attended by hundreds of Long Island Jews, in addition to the countless Chabad'niks in attendance.

Now, at a Chassidic wedding, the time before the chupah and the chupah are extremely serious times. People are meditating, blessing bride and groom, etc. Lots of introspection takes place, including plenty of crying from the mothers of bride and groom as they pray on their behalf for a bright future.

I'm standing there during this emotional Chupah, and one of the Long Island guests says to me: I've never seen such a serious wedding in my life... (so to say: can't they chill out? What's the big deal... it's only a wedding, get over it.) I didn't say anything, partially because I wasn't sure what to say. Fast forward, a couple hours later, I bump into that same individual in the midst of the most joyous dancing imaginable (as Chassidic weddings are famous for). And the man says to me: I've never seen such a joyous wedding in my life...

So I explain to the man: the reason for both observations is really the same. If it's real – then it's serious, and it's very joyous. If it's not real, if marriage is just a random thing (which we try for a few years to see if it'll work out) and nothing very important is really taking place; then it's not very serious, and it's also not very joyous. It's just a wedding, no big deal. Relax. Get over it. But if marriage represents two halves of one soul coming together to fulfill the joint mission of both their souls, the purpose for which these souls were brought down to earth... WOW! This is serious stuff! We take this very seriously; every moment is intensely precious and we pray for the material and spiritual wellbeing of the new couple (imagine the intensity experienced when the Entebbe crew was sent off...) By the same token, the celebration that follows is beyond belief. The joy is boundless. Wow, something real has happened to the two young people. Something planned by the Creator of life...

(BTW – this is also the order of the holiday month of Tishrei – the awesome intensity of the Days of Awe followed by the boundless joy of Sukkot and even more so Simchat Torah. It follows the same pattern. For similar reasons).

So seriousness in life, including the restrictions that come along with a meaningful life, isn't impediments to joy. Quite to the contrary. They are cause for joy.

"But rabbi, I want to have fun?!" How often do I hear that... "I know it's un-kosher, immoral behavior. But I want to have some fun. C'mon... give me a break.

How do you feel after you've allowed yourself to enjoy the meaningless, purposeless behavior? Everyone is quick to admit that they don't feel good or proud about the behavior, not before, during or after... In fact, for anyone who still has a soul, this behavior is torturous.

But its fun... There's a disconnect here... We need to differentiate between FUN and PLEASURE. They're not the same... Fun denotes an empty feeling. Pleasure brings feelings of fulfillment. Fun often comes from behaviors that make us feel empty inside, and unimportant... Just easy, "fun" behavior. While pleasure can often come from things that are not fun at all... Pleasure can come from a hard days' work, from working hard to get our kids through college, etc. None of these things are fun. But they're filled with pleasure. At times pleasure can come from fun as well, when the fun is appropriate and wholesome. But the two are certainly not necessarily synonymous...

Excerpts from a speech given by the father of a Bat Mitzvah girl at a recent Bat Mitzvah at Chabad:

My dear child:

You are big; You are smart, you know best. So don't pay listen to anyone, follow your own path; Follow your heart to where it leads you; Finally, find out what it is that you really want out of life, and go after it with all of the passion in your soul...

As I listened to this speech, I thought to myself: Funny thing... If I were speaking to my BM child, I'd say the exact opposite on all accounts:

You are small, you're no big shot, in fact you're a little shtinker... but you are in fact very big and very important because you are connected to an Infinite, Eternal G-d who created you to serve Him and His purpose; You've got lots to learn, so learn from every single human being who crosses your path; Follow your mind, rather than your heart. Let the mind decide when it is ok for the heart to kick into gear; Finally, find out what it is that you can contribute to the world, and go after it with all of the passion in your soul...

This is the way to raise healthy children, with self esteem:

When I teach a child he is big and that his life is all about him and his dreams and wants, it's depressing. It's counterintuitive... because he knows he's really not so big and not so important. So if his entire life is just about something as small as him... what a depressing thought...

However, when I teach a child that they are not an accident of fate, they were handcrafted by the Creator, who only has one like them, for a special purpose which is important to Him, that makes sense. I'm small, but a great G-d needs me and my mitzvahs and my acts of Jewish-ness, goodness and kindness. That builds self esteem in children as they develop a "real" sense of self worth...

Rabbi Manis Friedman was invited once to visit a teenager who was suicidal in the hospital. As soon as he walked in the kid said to him, "Rabbi, the priest was already here, I know the whole spiel, don't bother wasting your breath". So the Rabbi tried to engage him in conversation. He says, "what did the priest tell you?" The boy responds, "Well he said everybody loves you, your parents love you, G-d loves you, and you shouldn't do it."

"So, what do you think of that?" the Rabbi asks. "Well, I think it's stupid. Just because they love me I should stick around? They need something to love, is that my problem? If they need something to love, let them get a doll or a dog, why are they picking on me?" So Rabbi Friedman says, "Yes your right, I agree with you, actually you are not lovable at all, I don't love you, I think you're an obnoxious kid." So

now he got the kid's attention, and the child retorts, "Really? So why do you want me to stay alive?" Rabbi Friedman responds "Because G-d needs you, why do you think G-d made you - for nothing? If He made you, He needs you, He has a job for you to do, now get out of bed and get to work".

That, dear friends, is what makes us tick. Not love, not the feeling of taking care of ourselves, but the feeling that we are created for a purpose, we are needed to take care of others, to accomplish something in the world, that's who we are, that is how we are wired up. We feel great when we are serving that purpose and making a difference. We're miserable when we are not.

Ask yourself – what is the Mission Statement of my life? It almost doesn't matter what answer you give yourself right now. Just by asking the question you are opening yourself up to realizing there's got to be more to life than just another few quarters in the arcade... a few more years of fun and games. Eventually, that realization will put one on a path to search. If you search, you will find. As a Jew, if you search for your soul's mission, you will eventually come to the realization that Jewish-ness is central to that mission.

I recently met with a young couple contemplating marriage. I asked if they understood the challenge of marriage. They said they did and weren't worried because they were exactly alike in all important areas. They went on to explain that when they first met, some 5 years earlier, he was into sports while she was into the theater. But now, she's gotten into sports and he's gotten into theater... so they're identical... and they're sure to live happily ever after.

I explained to them that the details of their particular hobbies wasn't all that important. In fact at times opposites attract. Or it can be nice to have similar interests. But none of this is critical. What is really important, I told them, was that the couple have the same Mission Statement for their lives. That their core beliefs and central goals and priority system be the same or very similar. That's really important.

At that moment I was called out for an important private phone call. When I returned 5 minutes later I found the couple in tears, and in a major fight... I asked what had happened... They said they realized, not only aren't their Mission Statements aligned, but they're not sure they even have Mission Statements for their lives...

Is my own life less important than a business?! If any successful business has a MS, doesn't my life deserve one?

For a Jew, an important part of their Mission Statement will be Judaism. Our Jewish souls descent to this life in order to make the world holy, letakein olam, through Torah and Mitzvos. And although we all observe the same Shabbat and the same tefillin, each of us does it in our own unique way. No one in history ever lit the Shabbat Candles quite the way you do; because you come with your unique set of circumstances, background and personality. So while the mitzvos might be the same, the mission is individual...

I ask each of you to consider right now, at the outset of Yom Kippur, what your New Year's mitzvah resolutions might be. (I suggest two resolutions: One personal such as tefillin, Shabbat Candles, torah study, prayer, and one familial, such as Shabbat dinner, synagogue attendance as a family, mezuzahs on the home etc). This is the bottom line of Yom Kippur...

Vacationers begin taking pictures before they even leave to the airport, so that they don't lose a single moment of the experience.... I suggest we BEGIN our Yom Kippur journey, under the leadership of our great Captain, thinking about what our resolution might be; what it is that we plan to take away from this journey.

Good luck and Shana Tova!