

## **Yom Kippur 5782**

### **The Small Things**

A little while ago one of those teachings about how to focus your life became popular and made the rounds on the internet and in self-improvement columns in newspapers.

It went something like this:

*There's a well-known story about a university professor who wanted to make a point about the importance of prioritizing how we spend our time.*

*The professor stood in front of his class with a display of items. He took a large empty jar and filled it with rocks approximately two inches in diameter. He then asked the class if the jar was full and they agreed yes, the jar was full.*

*The professor then took a box of pebbles and added them to the jar and gave it a little shake to move the pebbles into the open areas around the rocks. The professor asked the class again if the jar was full they agreed yes, it is full.*

*This time the professor then took a box of sand and added it to the jar, filling the spaces between the rocks and the pebbles. He asked again, now is the jar full? They laughed and agreed yes, it's full.*

*This jar represents your life. The big rocks signify the really important things in your life, such as health family and friends. The pebbles are the other things that matter in your life, such as work or school. And the sand signifies the remaining small stuff, such as material possessions.*

*Now, if you were to reverse the order of filling the jar and add the sand first there would not be enough room for the rocks and the pebbles. The same principle applies to your life. If you spend too much time on the small stuff you won't have enough space or time to focus on the things that are truly important, the big rocks.*

*So, prioritize the big rocks first. Practice self-care, spend quality time with the people you love and the rest is just pebbles and sand... they will always find some space.<sup>1</sup>*

Well, since our calendar gives us a whole day to appraise and adjust our lives and our priorities, shall we see how this idea works for us?

Well, superficially it probably does. We can all think about some aspects of our lives that are more important than other things and move them to the front of the line. But today is

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mindfulpractices.us/2020/06/16/prioritizing-your-life-rocks-pebbles-sand/>

a day when we inspect our lives microscopically. And...it's been a year. A pandemic followed by a hurricane. That's going to shake the jar.

“Big rocks are what's important.” But:

- we've changed our ideas of what's important. Think about the amount of trash in the streets - who's an essential worker now? Not who we might first have thought.
- And what if you just can't use the big rocks? Take the example of how we have had to adapt the shul. All the basics - gathering together, eating together, praying together - became impossible.

And the same has been true for the wider community, for its organizations and for the world. It feels as though everything has been turned upside down. While the basic principle still holds - health, family and friends are still important - those priorities now sit in a very different context and we understand them very differently.

So what do we do now when the jar has been turned upside down and the big rocks all feel different? How do we decide how we will assess our lives and set our priorities? As always, our tradition offers us some new understandings.

While two of our patriarchs get a lot of play during the High Holydays, we don't get to hear as much about Jacob. Yet the imagery of Jacob wrestling with the angel has felt especially relevant this year for many of us - the courage we have had to find to engage with enormous forces that we can't control, but with which we have no choice but to grapple.

Immediately before his encounter, the Torah describes Jacob as being “left alone.”<sup>2</sup> Rashi asks why this was, and concludes:

עליהם וחזר קטנים פכים שכח

*He had forgotten some little things and went back to get them.*

Why would Jacob do that? Everything he cared about he'd already sent over the river (does this echo how we just evacuated? Why yes, it does). The gifts to appease Esau, sent in daylight. His family, who he took across in secret that night. And yet, he ended up alone on the bank of the Yabbok, to meet the angel and ultimately to emerge wounded but victorious, fundamentally changed by the encounter.

All because of some little things.

It's time to look more closely at the pebbles and the sand in the jar.

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<sup>2</sup> Bereishit 32:25

A pandemic, a hurricane - what do the pebbles and sand symbolize now?

Perhaps these small things are precisely the ones that remind us that we are strong - the small moments with our friends and our families, a short message on our phones, a courteous driver who waves us into a parking space. It doesn't take much.

In a piece called "The Bigness of Little Things," Rabbi Gregory Marx of Congregation Beth Or in Maple Glen points out that when it comes to mitzvot, there is no such thing as big or small. The commandments given after the Revelation at Sinai are not graded. The small things are just as important as the big ones.<sup>3</sup>

It's the same with the confessions of YK. Every single letter of the alphabet is included. The order is alphabetical, not an order of priority. Talking trash is on a par with theft, violence and all the others. There are no big or small transgressions, there are just transgressions. Everything is important.

And what's the lesson? Well, it's clear that when it comes to our own jars on this particular Yom Kippur, the rocks don't work like they used to. But it's not that we are just making do with pebbles and sand. It's that the pebbles and the sand are just as important as the rocks. And if the rocks don't work for a while, we need to know and truly acknowledge that we can manage without them, provided we have sand and pebbles.

There's a comfort in small things. They sustain us. They're always accessible. As I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, we only need to look down, and there they are.

And small things aren't just for this lifetime. We are about to begin the Yizkor service. It's true, isn't it, that it's not so much the big things that touch our hearts as we remember those we love who are no longer in the world – it's "the little things they used to do."

One more thing. I'm indebted to Rabbi Michael Cohen for pointing out that some of the most important things don't take up any space. In some examples of that professor's teaching, water is added to the jar last of all. The Holy One is called *Hamakom* - the One who is somehow everywhere, all of the time, and for whom there is always space.

Let me end with a poem – a new one that I found only recently. It expresses this idea of small things very beautifully.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.jewishexponent.com/2021/02/11/the-bigness-of-little-things/>

**Bounty**

by Robyn Sarah

Make much of something small.  
The pouring-out of tea,  
a drying flower's shadow on the wall  
from last week's sad bouquet.  
A fact: it isn't summer any more.

Say that December sun  
is pitiless, but crystalline  
and strikes like a bell.  
Say it plays colours like a glockenspiel.  
It shows the dust as well,

the elemental sediment  
your broom has missed,  
and lights each grain of sugar spilled  
upon the tabletop, beside  
pistachio shells, peel of a clementine.

Slippers and morning papers on the floor,  
and wafts of iron heat from rumbling rads,  
can this be all? No, look — here comes the cat,  
with one ear inside out.  
Make much of something small.

May this be a year of us celebrating the small things.  
Gmar hatimah tovah.