

TOWARD IMPROVING YOUR MASTERPIECE JOURNEY IN THE YEAR AHEAD

1. Writing to the Ephesians, Paul reminds us “we are his workmanship, created in Messiah Yeshua for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Paul refers to “workmanship” just one other time when addressing the Corinthians saying, “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Yeshua our Lord? Are not you my **workmanship** in the Lord?”
 - a. The word underlying workmanship is *poema*, and yes, it is the root from which we get *poem*. The word comes down to us in English from the Greek and Latin and it means "a thing made or created."
 - b. Using a synonym, you might say then that we are God's handiwork just Paul calls the disciples in Corinth, over whom Paul had labored hard and long, his *poema*, his workmanship, his handiwork.
 - c. And through God's creating us, redeeming us, and filling us with His Spirit, we are the workmanship, the handiwork of the Master Craftsman.
 - d. Our Yom Kippur liturgy picks up on this thought in a magnificent poem of its own::
 - ' Indeed, as the clay in the hand of the molder, who, when he wishes expands it and when he wishes contracts it, so are we in Your hand, O You who remembers deeds of lovingkindness; Look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.
 - Indeed, as the stone in the hand of the mason, who, when he wishes retains it and when he wishes smashes it, so are we in Your hand, O You who gives life and brings death; Look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.
 - Indeed, as iron in the hand of the smith, who, when he wishes thrusts it into fire and when he wishes draws it out, so are we in Your hand, O You who supports the poor and the destitute; Look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.
 - Indeed, as the glass in the hand of the glass-blower, who, when he wishes forms it and when he wishes melts it, so are we in Your hand, O You who forgives willful sins and inadvertent errors; Look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.
 - Indeed, as the tapestry in the hand of the weaver, who, when he wishes works it straight and when he wishes twists it, so are we in Your hand, O You who are a stern God of retribution; Look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.
 - Indeed, as the silver in the hand of the silversmith, who, when he wishes adulterates it and when he wishes refines it, so are

we in Your hand, O You who provides a cure for our wound;
Look to the covenant and do not regard our evil inclination.

2. Picking up on the imagery of God as a potter, Paul says in Romans 9, we are “vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles.”
3. Made in his image, redeemed through Messiah, and filled with His Spirit, we are God’s *poema*, his workmanship, the handiwork of the Master Craftsman. This is why we must, at this time of the year, we give attention to how we have used the gift of life, pleading to the Holy One for mercy that we might have yet another year yet to come, earnestly seeking and preparing that this coming year we will live better than in the past one.

Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us, “Our task is to hallow time, to enable [the Holy One] to enter our moments, to be at home in our time, in what we do with time.” Indeed, Heschel reminds us that life is what we do with God’s time.

4. I have taught recently that our tasks as God’s works of art, his POETRY if you will, is to edit our lives so that his handiwork might better be displayed for what it is meant to be. We are called by God to continue the project of making our lives works of holy art. And as my friend Patricia Levy Andrews reminded me, a good definition of artistic work is taking away what is non-essential. This is what I have called, “editing our lives.”
5. Today we will be focusing on the first half of today’s Haftarah reading which will help us to distinguish between the essential and the non-essential, and to deal with each appropriately.
 - a. We will do this by comparing our lives to a journey toward God and his will for our lives. where we are either getting on with it, or getting detoured, disinterested, of perhaps might even have defected from this most crucial of all projects.
 - b. In the Bible God’s people are always on some sort of journey. The journey continues. It is time for us to examine the trip we are on.

Let’s remember today that our life is supposed to get somewhere –

- a. Repentance is a life-long reorientation of our journey, seeking to return to a relationship with God and His purposes which we never should have left and perhaps have yet to discover.
- b. Now is the time to recalibrate our inner GPS units and realign with what our real purposes in life ought to be in the various connections in which we find ourselves, family, community, friends, work, whatever.
- c. This is a time to recognize that in some ways each of us is far from home, so it is time to turn around, realign ourselves and to return to going in the right direction. In this connection, Martin Buber was right when he said, “Each of us must return from exile in his own way.” It is indeed time for the Prodigal to turn around. What would that look like in your life today? In mine? What do we need to turn from? What do we need to turn toward?
These are the most crucial questions to have before us every day of

our lives. EVERY DAY. But supremely, this is the task before us on this Day of Atonement.

- d. Our Haftarah gives us great directions. Let's take a look.

**Then he will say,
“Keep building! Keep building! Clear the way!
Remove everything blocking my people's path!” (57:14)**

1. To Get On With Our Masterpiece Journey, there are some things in our lives which we should be continually building and strengthening (Isa 57:14)

- a. We must build up and strengthen the things that make for revealing and polishing ourselves as the work of God, the master craftsman.
- i. This refers to our character
 - ii. This refers to our conduct
 - iii. This refers to our faithfulness to our gifts and calling -

This is so important that in the next to last verse at the end of Colossians, Paul adds something that has nothing to do with the context of what he had written earlier. He just has to say one thing more before he goes. He says this: “And say to Archippus, ‘See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.’”(Col 4:17,ESV).

This is an important word to each of us here: “See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.” Or as our Haftarah puts it, “Keep building! Keep building!”

How have you been doing getting on with the life that God has given you? How have you been managing your journey? Are you getting on with perfecting and polishing yourself as his handiwork?

2. To Get On With Our Masterpiece Journey There Are Some Things We Need To Tear Down - To properly conduct this journey, there are some things in our lives which we must tear down, weaken and destroy. There are things which we must edit from our lives (Isa 57:14) “Remove everything blocking my people's path!”

- a. We need again to recognize where our lives should be heading
- b. And in editing our lives we should be asking ourselves these kinds of questions:

- i. Where am I heading?
 - ii. What activities or relationships are helping me stay focused on that goal?
 - iii. What activities or relationship detour me from that goal?
 - iv. Therefore, what or who do I need to remove from my life and/or what steps must I take to weaken their hold on me?
 - v. For me the big issue is to become aware of who or what detours me and who saps my momentum? Then to do what I must to prevent this from continuing in my life.
- c. A STORY – I was mentoring someone on line whose life is a bit of a mess. She is an alcoholic, and when she drinks, she does stupid things, especially in the area of sexual mores. She is a professional woman and well educated. This is a disaster. She is working on her life. There is a man perhaps twenty five years her senior who took a shine to her on Facebook, and even though they have not met, seeks, over Facebook, to control her life. He acts like she is answerable to him. She unfriended him of course. And recently he sought to be refriended and so he was. She asked my opinion. Here is what I said.
- “Here is a question for you to ask and answer. Is this fellow a source of clarity for you or a source of confusion? In my life I seek to minimize the influence of people who are energy vampires whose way of dealing with me saps my momentum, and also people who detour my life from sane and right pathways. So, as we come to Yom Kippur, ask yourself about this fellow and about others in your life: Is this person helping me move my life forward in direction and energy, or is this person diverting me and draining me? Simple, but serious questions. They should be asked and answered and then kept in mind.”
- d. This is what it means to edit your life and to take responsibility for your life and its journey as God’s masterpiece.

**For thus says the High, Exalted One
who lives forever, whose name is Holy:
“I live in the high and holy place
but also with the broken and humble,
in order to revive the spirit of the humble
and revive the hearts of the broken ones. (v. 15).**

3. **To Get On With Our Masterpiece Journey We Need To Welcome contrition** - an awareness that we are a bit lost and need to correct our paths (v. 15). Some related questions:

- a. Am I humble? Or am I rather, defensive?
- b. Am I broken? Or am I rather fiercely self-justifying and self-reliant?
- c. God dwells with the humble and the broken—those sufficiently in touch with their bungling that they offer no justifications, no excuses. (STORY - David and Saul)

**¹⁶ For I will not fight them forever
or always nurse my anger;
otherwise their spirits would faint before me,
the creatures I myself have made.
¹⁷ It was because of their flagrant greed
that I was angry and struck them;
I hid myself and was angry,
but they continued on their own rebellious way.**

4. **To Get On With Our Masterpiece Journey We Need To Read the Signs** (vv. 16-17)

- a. In what ways has God intercepted you in your life and caused you to recognize his disfavor?
- b. In what ways are you in trouble and distress because of your self-justifying choices? How's that going for you?
- c. What signs might there be that you have lost your way?
- d. Has God fired any rounds across your bow this year, any close calls in order to get your attention? Have you gotten the message? What have you done and what will you do about this?
- e. All we like sheep have gone astray. How have YOU gone astray?

**¹⁸ I have seen their ways, and I will heal them;
I will lead them and give comfort
to them and to those who mourn for them —
¹⁹ I will create the right words:
'*Shalom shalom* to those far off
and to those nearby!' says *Adonai*;
'I will heal them!'"**

5. **To Get On With Our Masterpiece Journey We Need To Be Willing to acknowledge and change our *modus operandi* - change direction** (vv. 18-19).
God says he will lead you. Be prepared to follow.

If we will do these things, we can expect a good turn in the road—well-being.
Shalom Shalom! And if not? Nothing good will come of it.

²⁰ But the wicked are like the restless sea —
unable to be still,
its waters toss up mud and dirt.
²¹ There is no *shalom*, says my God,
for the wicked.

At the end of our Haftarah God gives us a picture of the life of blessedness he has prepared for us if we follow his directions. Here are some signposts of a life well-lived, one that is heading in the right direction. And in the midst, the Prophet tells us the benefits of such a disciplined and profitable journey

⁶ “Here is the sort of fast I want —
releasing those unjustly bound,
untying the thongs of the yoke,
letting the oppressed go free,
breaking every yoke,
⁷ sharing your food with the hungry,
taking the homeless poor into your house,
clothing the naked when you see them,
fulfilling your duty to your kinsmen!”

⁸ Then your light will burst forth like the morning,
your new skin will quickly grow over your wound;
your righteousness will precede you,
and *Adonai*’s glory will follow you.

⁹ Then you will call, and *Adonai* will answer;
you will cry, and he will say, “Here I am.”
If you will remove the yoke from among you,
stop false accusation and slander,
¹⁰ generously offer food to the hungry
and meet the needs of the person in trouble;

then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your gloom become like noon.

¹¹ *Adonai* will always guide you;
he will satisfy your needs in the desert,
he will renew the strength in your limbs;
so that you will be like a watered garden,
like a spring whose water never fails.

¹² You will rebuild the ancient ruins,
raise foundations from ages past,
and be called “Repairer of broken walls,
Restorer of streets to live in.”

¹³ “If you hold back your foot on *Shabbat*
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;
if you call *Shabbat* a delight,
Adonai’s holy day, worth honoring;
then honor it by not doing your usual things
or pursuing your interests or speaking about them.

¹⁴ If you do, you will find delight in *Adonai* —
I will make you ride on the heights of the land
and feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Ya‘akov,
for the mouth of *Adonai* has spoken.”

May this be you. May this be me. May this be now.

Tzom Kal. Have an easy fast.