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WEEKLY MAGAZINE

Daily Thought

The Dream

You build a dream house.

You start with a dream. The dream becomes a plan. The plan becomes a lot of dirty work. The dirty work becomes a house. If you are successful, it is the house of your dreams.

Dream, plan, dirty work, success. Why is this the fundamental strategy of all human endeavor? Because it is the story of the universe.

Those who can feel the dream, those who can read the plan, they see we are now at the finishing touches.

INNER DIMENSIONS: **MAN AS VERB** *By Tzvi Freeman*

I'll let you in on a little surprise: Who says that yourself is the real you? Maybe the real you is not a subject, not an object, but a verb? Maybe the real you is to be found not in who you are but in those things you need to do?

VOICES: **MY FIRST YIZKOR** *By Yossi Jacobson*

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LIVING: **VEGETABLE SOUP** *By Chana Weisberg*

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STORY: **THE CONFUSED CAMEL** *By Pesach and Chana Burston*

Why do I have this hump perched on my back? These weird long eye-lashes? These awkwardly-shaped feet?

PARSHAH: **VA'EIRA**

Blood, frogs, lice, wild animals, pestilence, boils, hail -- all to get the Jews out of Egypt and Egypt out of the Jews... Also: Pharaoh as the ultimate frog, the difference between selfish martyrdom and true self-sacrifice, and Moses gets an answer (of sorts) from G-d on the ancient question of human suffering

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Editor: Yanki Tauber

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MAN AS VERB

By Tzvi Freeman

INNER DIMENSIONS

Once upon a time, every book was about being perfect. Every book told you, "This is how you are supposed to be; now go and be that."

Then Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (the "Alter Rebbe," 1745-1813) wrote a book for "the rest of us." He even called it *Sefer Shel Benonim*--meaning, the book for the average guy. The first Book of Kabbalistic Enlightenment for the Everyguy. (We call it *Tanya* because that's the first word in the book.)

As it turns out, for the average guy who wants to get life right there's really only one question. That's the question Rabbi Schneur Zalman poses at the beginning of his book--
Once upon a time, every book was about being perfect and then repeats in different forms at frequent intervals. Not surprisingly, that question lies at the core of all the typical maladies of "the rest of us": Guilt, depression, apathy and feelings of inadequacy.

Here's how Rabbi Schneur Zalman presents the question:

Before you were born, the sages taught us, they made you take an oath: "Be righteous. Don't be wicked. Yet, even if the entire world tells you that you are righteous, think of yourself as though you were wicked."

This requires clarification. Didn't we learn in *The Ethics of the Fathers*, "Never consider yourself wicked"?

Furthermore, if a person considers himself wicked, he will be disheartened and depressed and won't be able to serve G-d with joy. On the other hand, if he does not become at all depressed from this, he could come to treat life as a joke, G-d forbid.

Let's put this in modern language. Instead of righteous and wicked, let's use something that communicates the same ideas, but something closer to our modern psyche:

Here's a wild teaching from the ancient sages: They taught that before you were born, the Heavenly Court made you swear you would be a spiritually enlightened being and never be a failure. Then they told you that "even if the entire world guru-tizes you as the ultimate enlightened being, consider yourself a failure."

They couldn't possibly have meant this. After all, these are the same sages that taught us, "Never consider yourself a failure."

Furthermore, everyone knows that if you go around thinking, "I'm a failure, I'm a failure" you're bound to feel like a worm and it's going to be pretty hard to get up and go to work in the morning. But the Torah tells us you have to

serve G-d with joy! How are you going to serve G-d with joy if you think of yourself as a perpetual failure?

Well, you could just decide not to take failure so seriously. You could say, "So I'm a loser. Big deal. I still have to be happy." G-d forbid to live such a life. A person living like that could end up doing anything.



Get the question? I didn't. Until, after some thirty years of studying the book, an old friend of mine who made good as a psychologist, Rabbi Dr. Y. Y. Shagalov, pointed it out to me:

The entire book is about, "Why shouldn't I be depressed?"

It's a question endemic to life on earth. It's a tension none of us can escape: knowing what we should be and knowing we will never reach it.

We see our failures every day--and even when we succeed, we still know inside that this is not the real thing. The real thing is in some Garden of Eden where we lived before we were born, but definitely not here. Yet we keep on expecting ourselves to be that perfect being that precedes life on this planet.

So we get tied up in knots over failure. And those knots just make it even harder to get anywhere--so we fail even more. And then they tell us to rejoice in our lot.

What's the answer? The answer is strewn across 53 short but pithy chapters that challenge every common intuition of normal human beings, using standard received wisdom to turn wisdom on its head. But that's okay, because my buddy psychologist turned me on to that, as well. If I were to sum it up in one line, it would have to be as follows:

Stop thinking about who you are and who you are supposed to be and start thinking of what you are supposed to be doing. Not *what am I* but *where am I*. "What am I" is: How do I feel about this? Have I achieved enlightenment yet? Are we there yet? "Where am I" is: What am I doing, speaking and thinking *right now*?

Actually, not to be insulting or anything, but the more you get yourself out of the picture, the better off you're going to be.

Take Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, one of the great teachers of the Talmud. On his deathbed, before his students, he broke into tears. "Why are you crying, our teacher?" they asked.

He replied, "Know my children, that I see before me two paths upon which they take those who leave this world. One is to eternal reward and one is not so good. And I do not know on which path they will take me!"

Come on, Rabbi Yochanan! Until now you never thought about this?

No, he didn't. He never had time. All his life, Rabbi Yochanan was only thinking, "What is the best thing for me to invest myself into right now?" Only

at his final moments did he take time to think into, "So where am I? What will be with me?"

That's something Rabbi Schneur Zalman once advised someone. It was a businessman--who was also a scholar and a chassid. He was bemoaning his financial losses, which did not allow him to pay his debts or fulfill his commitments to his family. "All I ask is that G-d provide me with the means to be upright and discharge my obligations to others!" he cried.

To which was responded, "I'm hearing a lot about what you need. Can we hear something about why you are needed?"

Who needs you? The world needs you. Otherwise you wouldn't have been put here. That's what all these challenges of life are about--they are the world beckoning you, "Take me on! Change me! Transform me!" You're here on a mission--not to be Superman or Wonderwoman--or even Super Soul--you're here on a mission impossible to wrestle in the dirt with the real world, from inside a very limiting body, with a frail human personality--in order to transform all those things into something Divine.

Sure you're going to fall flat on your face once in a while. The ultimate goal is something we can never reach on our own. Most of us end up with a pound of failures for every ounce of success. But what makes that your business? Your business is to keep the ship afloat and on course over the turbulent seas. Collateral damage? Seasickness? You try to avoid it, you

fix it when it happens--but it goes with the territory.

Now you're going to say, "But what about finding myself? What about discovering the essence within?"

So I'll let you in on a little surprise: Who says that yourself is the real you? Maybe the real you is not a subject, not an object, but a verb? In other words, maybe the real you is to be found not in who you are but in those things you need to do. Because when G-d conceived of you, that's what He had in mind: a little creature, with a piece of His consciousness inside, doing these neat things. In that Divine Image He created you and in that you will find your true self--and Him, as well.

That's why Rabbi Schneur Zalman goes to great lengths to demonstrate that as lofty and divine our inner soul may be, it can never touch its essence until it is "dressed within the clothes of Torah and mitzvahs." "Clothes make the man," they say (I don't know why they never say that about women) and so it is with that G-dly essence within you.

Want to find your essential self? Do something that will bring some light into the world. There you are--your very essence. Not in the light, not in the something, but in the "do."

Tzvi Freeman is the author of a number of highly original renditions of Kabbalah and Chassidic teaching, including the universally acclaimed "Bringing Heaven Down to Earth." To order Tzvi's books [click here](#).

MY FIRST YIZKOR

By Yossi Jacobson

VOICES

For the first 33 years of my life I was lucky enough to be expelled from the synagogue during *yizkor* services, when congregants pray for the souls of loved ones who have passed on and those with both parents alive leave the synagogue.

I never probed the reason for this custom. As a child, even as an adult, I was happy to be legally expelled from the synagogue, to catch a fresh breath of air and enjoy a schmooze with a fellow *yizkor*-evacuee. As children, it often meant that my friends and I could return an hour or two later without our fathers getting angry.

All of that changed this year for me. My father, a pioneer of the Yiddish press in America, died at 70. Two weeks later came the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, when we commemorate the giving of the Torah at Sinai. It is also a day when synagogues throughout the world hold *yizkor* services.

Synagogues, unlike churches, are often noisy. The synagogue I attended for that holiday and *yizkor* service was small, but particularly diverse, opinionated and loud. One hundred people filled this humble, 60-year-old synagogue in Brooklyn, and at every pause in the prayers

they were engaged in vibrant conversation and debate. As the congregation was finishing the reading of the Torah, the arguments--typical Jewish arguments--reached a crescendo. In one corner, a fierce debate ensued about Israel's pending withdrawal from Gaza. In another corner, an item of religious law was being heatedly argued. Children were kvetching, older men were getting annoyed. Others were attempting to concentrate on their prayers with closed eyes and open hearts.

Then came time for *yizkor*. More than half the people in the synagogue left. The sacred Torah scroll was brought to the center of the room. One of the worshippers made sure all that all who had to leave left and that the door was solidly shut so no one could enter. He then gave a knock on the table to signify that the *yizkor* service would now begin.

Suddenly, an eerie silence filled the room. A vibrant space, just moments ago pulsating with social zest and heated debate, was transformed. A sense of mystery, awe and dormant pain surfaced. You could cut the rawness of the emotions with a knife. Something

profoundly authentic united all those standing in the room.

My heart shifted to my late father, whom I loved and adored so deeply. My flow of tears found solace in the knowledge that his was a life well lived. My dad was a man who utilized his journalistic wisdom and skills to become a voice for causes others left behind; he was a man of conviction, and a truly original

personality, one hell of a guy. I recalled my father's last hours and the dignity with which he departed on his final journey. And I wept for my children who would not have the privilege to know the unique grandfather they had.



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I lifted my eyes and gazed around at the people in the room. Near me stood a young man, my age, who lost his mother at the tender age of 5. Life without *yizkor* was inconceivable to him. Near him, stood others who lost parents in their teens or in college and needed to struggle to fill the unfillable void. Then there were the older men, in their 70s and 80s, whose parents perished more than six decades earlier in Stalin's gulag or Hitler's crematoriums. They are in a class of their own. Then, of course, there were the majority of middle-aged worshippers who at some point in

their lives were forced to confront the reality of loss.

A strange oneness pervaded all of us standing in that room during yizkor. The connection did not need to be articulated in words; you could see it when you peered into the eyes of the person standing near you. It took me some time till I put my finger on what that connection consisted of: A piece of each of us was not to be found any longer in this world. An integral part of each of our hearts was elsewhere.

I understood why for 33 years I was asked to leave the synagogue during yizkor. Life for those who stay behind in the synagogue has a very different meaning, one that cannot be shared by those who have not seen the earth close up on a loved one.

This Yom Kippur I will again stand in the synagogue during yizkor. I will think of my Dad, which will make me both laugh and cry at the same time. I will ask him to look out for me and my family. And I will pray that I merit

to internalize my beloved father’s zest for life and for truth.

Rabbi Yosef Y Jacobson is editor of [Algemeiner.com](http://www.algemeiner.com), a website of Jewish news and commentary in English and Yiddish. Rabbi Jacobson is also a popular and widely-sought speaker on Chassidic teaching and the author of the tape series "A Tale of Two Souls."

VEGETABLE SOUP

By Chana Weisberg

It's a cold, wintry day; the perfect day for a thick, hearty, home-made vegetable soup.

LIVING

I stack a pile of vegetables on the kitchen counter. Little Yisroel is occupied with a playmate in the adjoining room and the baby is napping. I begin the methodic task of scrubbing, peeling and chopping. I make sure to include everyone's favorites: potatoes for one daughter, peas for another, zucchini for my husband and yams for the baby.

As the onions are sautéing, I hear rising voices emanating from the family room. I make a mental decision not to interject quite yet, with the hope that the boys will learn to resolve their conflict independently.

I'm cubing potatoes as I hear Yisroel's friend, Meir, bragging, "My father is m-u-c-h taller than Shlomo's father." I smile remembering that Meir's father isn't all that tall, but think how sweet it is that his son looks up to him so. "My father is even a little taller than yours." He pauses before continuing, "He's also v-e-r-y strong."

"You think *your* father is strong?" my son counters. "My father is m-u-c-h stronger! He can even lift this heavy book case." I can almost visualize Yisroel pointing to the impossibly heavy shelves attached to the wall.

Not to be outdone, Meir retorts, "Well *my* father is t-h-e *most* smartest!"

"Ha!" Yisroel asserts himself. "Do you see all the books in this room? My father learned them all! And he's even got a whole other room full of even *more* books!"

"I'll bet he doesn't have as many as my Zaidy..."

"Well my Zaidy is the biggest!"

I'm chopping the carrots now, fervently hoping that I won't be called upon to rule on this argument until all



the vegetables are nicely simmering. But the voices are rising as steadily as the bruised egos. I toss in a handful of peas, watch the medley of vegetables come to a gentle boil, and think how much like the pot of soup our lives are.

We each may view ourselves as the favorite vegetable that plays the central or most flavorful role. Every vegetable, though, adds its unique taste; some tangy, others zestful, others needed just for thickening, to hold the soup together. Some vegetables might be cubed larger, but like every human being in the pot of life, each emits an irreplaceable flavor.

Competitiveness is positive if it prods us to accomplish more in a constructive and mutually-encouraging manner. But it is destructive without the realization

and awareness of the integral, valuable role played by every individual.

A short while later, argument forgotten, I call the boys into the kitchen. There's nothing like a hot nourishing bowl of soup to soothe the mind--and the ego...

Chana Weisberg is the author of Divine Whispers: Stories that Speak to the Heart and Soul and three other books. Weisberg is a noted educator and columnist and lectures worldwide on issues relating to

women, faith, relationships and the Jewish soul.

THE CONFUSED CAMEL

By Pesach and Chana Burston

STORY

Once there was an adolescent camel that would pose questions to its mother incessantly, as all children naturally do.

"Mother, why do we have a hump perched on our backs?"

Mother replied, "My child, these humps prevent hunger and thirst as we trek through on long journeys through the dry desert. We store

rations of water inside our humps to quench our thirst."

"But mother, why do we have long eye-lashes?"

"Oh, son, those are to keep the sand in the desert from ruining our eyes during sandstorms. This protection allows us to continue traveling."

"And what about our awkwardly-shaped feet?"

"Aha! They support our legs from sinking into the soft sand. This

enables us to walk through the desert more easily and quickly."

Finally, frustrated and confused, the young camel cried out, "So what are we doing in the Bronx Zoo?!"

Parshah Va'eira

Exodus 6:2-9:35

G-d **reveals** Himself to Moses. Employing the "four expressions of redemption," He promises to **take out** the Children of Israel from Egypt, **deliver** them from their enslavement, **redeem** them and **acquire** them as His own chosen people at Mount Sinai; He will then bring them to the Land He promised to the Patriarchs as their eternal heritage.

Moses and Aaron repeatedly come before Pharaoh to demand in the name of G-d, "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me in the wilderness." Pharaoh repeatedly refuses. Aaron's **staff** turns into a **snake** and swallows the magic sticks of the Egyptian sorcerers. G-d then sends a series of **plagues** upon the Egyptians.

The waters of the Nile turn to **blood**; swarms of **frogs** overrun the land; **lice** infest all men and beasts. Hordes of **wild animals** invade the cities, a **pestilence** kills the domestic animals, painful **boils** afflict the Egyptians. For the seventh plague, fire and ice combine to descend from the skies as a devastating **hail**. Still, "the heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he would not let the children of Israel go; as G-d had said to Moses."

