YOM KIPPUR

How many of you read the Scott Adams comic strip “Dilbert”? I do, too, and I loved the one that appeared in *Newsday* this past June 26th. In it, Dilbert asks his colleague, Wally, “Do you have any long-term goals?”

Wally answers, “Just death.”

Dilbert responds, “Death isn’t a goal,” to which Wally replies, “It’s the best kind. This way, I can go out as a winner. With my last breath, I plan to do a fist pump and yell, ‘I did it.’”

I don’t know how many of you have goals that you want to achieve, but if, like Wally, death is one of your goals, *mazel tov*, that is one goal that all of us will achieve. Let’s just hope that none of us attains that goal any time in the near future.

But seriously, how many of us actually have set long-term goals for ourselves?

A few months ago I was talking with a group of rabbinic colleagues around my age, all of us at what I call “the sunset years of our rabbinical careers.” We were discussing eventual retirement, when I asked the question, “Do any of us still have professional goals that we want to achieve before we retire? I am not talking about general goals that all of us Rabbis have: agendas like encouraging our members to be more observant or to attend shul more regularly; I am talking about specific objectives.” I have to share with you – and I don’t know if this will make you happy or sad – that I was the only Rabbi who still had specific goals. And I will even tell you what mine are: With God’s help and the congregation’s assent, I would like to remain the Rabbi of the East Meadow Jewish Center long enough to complete the study of the entire Jewish Bible with my Adult Education Bible Class. I would like to be able to finish my career being able to declare that I studied and taught every book, every chapter, every verse, and every word of the entire Bible. By the way, that should take another – let’s see here –five or six, maybe seven years. My other goal is to complete the study of masechet Sanhedrin with our Shabbos afternoon Talmud class.

I imagine that many of us have goals. Maybe it is to lose a few pounds. Maybe it is to exercise more. Maybe it is to master a particular skill. College students may determine that their aim is to graduate and obtain a job in a particular field. Young people in their twenties and thirties may focus on meeting and marrying the right person and settling down to start a family. Parents of young children may strive to raise them properly, and to balance correctly the demands of family-raising and career. Those somewhat older may concentrate on accumulating enough financial resources to ensure a comfortable retirement. Those of us of a certain age may aim to spend more time with our grandchildren. And those older yet may make their goal to live as actively and safely as possible.

In modern English we have another name for a certain set of goals that we hope we can attain; we call it our “bucket list.” How many of us have a bucket list?

When I asked my colleagues at that meeting what was in their bucket lists, I have to admit that most of us, myself included, could not come up with anything terribly creative. I guess that means that we rabbis are a pretty dull bunch of guys. My bucket list is minimal, and it is all about completeness. I want to join the *daf yomi* program, perhaps when the next cycle begins. For those of you who do not know, *daf yomi* literally means “a page a day,” and refers to the initiative of studying one double-sided page of Talmud every day, so that one completes the study of the entire Talmud over the course of seven-plus years. I would like to hike the complete Appalachian Trail from end to end, though I doubt very much that I will accomplish that one, first, because at my age I sort of like my creature comforts, and, second, I do not think Nancy will, a), want to accompany me, and, b) justifiably, let me abandon her for six months.

But, to return to my original question, how many of us actually have goals? How many of those goals are really attainable? How many of those goals involve spiritual or Jewish growth?

Wally of the Dilbert cartoon may think that death is a long-term goal, but all of us know that there has to be more to living life than waiting to die. Whether we admit it to ourselves or not, we want to make the most of our years, we want to live lives full of meaning and replete with worth, we crave to live lives of significance.

In preparing for today’s sermon, I wanted to locate a Jewish text that would convey a set of three goals that would:

1. be appropriate to people of all ages;

2. be appropriate to any Jew, no matter his/her level of Jewish knowledge or observance;  
 3. be attainable;

4. be something performable every day, not just once in one’s lifetime;

5. and provide meaning and significance to our lives.

I wanted an agenda that would offer a viable alternative to Wally’s claim that death is the best long-term goal.

I searched through many of the classical Jewish texts in my office, but I kept on returning to one passage from the words of the Biblical prophet Micah. In this one verse, Micah encapsulates what it means to be a Jew. In this one verse, Micah presents us with a life-long prescription for daily living that imparts meaning, significance, and worth. I am going to make this my goal this year, and indeed for the remaining years that God grants me, and I hope that you will do so too.

Here is Micah’s directive:  הִגִּ֥יד לְךָ֛ אָדָ֖ם מַה־טּ֑וֹב וּמָה־יְהֹוָ֞ה דּוֹרֵ֣שׁ מִמְּךָ֗ - God has told you, O human, what is good and what the Lord demands of you:

כִּ֣י אִם־עֲשׂ֤וֹת מִשְׁפָּט֙ -- to do justice

וְאַ֣הֲבַת חֶ֔סֶד -- to love kindness

וְהַצְנֵ֥עַ לֶ֖כֶת עִם־אֱלֹהֶֽיךָ:-- and to walk humbly with your God.

Don’t you agree that that is a wonderful long-term goal that all of us can strive to achieve every day of our lives?!? (Repeat the three items.)

First, to do justice.

When the prophet Micah demands that we ‘do justice,” I think he means that we pursue that which is right in two ways. First, as many of the traditional commentators explain, it means our creating a just society. In our own times, that involves resolving many of the issues that I discussed last night. But building a just society also demands respect for the law on the part of all elements of society; it also demands that no one receives a free pass if he or she disregards the laws and norms of our country or society. It also means that society has to emphasize that there are rights and wrongs in this world, and that the moral relativism that afflicts contemporary society leads to social degeneracy.

But for my purposes today, I want to focus not so much on these larger issues of justice in society; I want to focus on making justice one of our *personal* goals. For me, Micah’s insistence that we “do justice” consists of our making sure that in every action we undertake every single day we act morally and ethically.

How do we do that? As we go through each day of our lives, we always encounter situations which require us to make a moral or ethical decision. Let me share with you some personal experiences of what I mean:

As many of you know, I do the food shopping in our family. Nancy prepares the shopping list and gathers all the coupons, but I am the one who goes to the store or supermarket to do the actual shopping. A few months ago, I was a Pat’s Farms. At Pat’s, for environmental reasons, I rarely use the plastic bags when checking out; rather, I utilize the cardboard boxes, if any are available, because I can recycle those. So I take a box from the pile at the end of the counter, and underneath it, in the box below, I see a dollar bill. What should I do? Give it to the cashier, just in case someone comes looking for it, or put it into my pocket – after all, “Finders keepers, losers weepers”? What is the proper action for me to perform?

You are not going to believe this, but I encountered almost the exact same situation just three or four weeks later. I took a box, and underneath it I found not just one dollar, but six dollars – a five and a single – that obviously had been someone’s change. What do I do? Hand it to the cashier? Put it into my pocket? Punt? And by “punt” I mean take the money and donate it to tzedakah. What is the morally correct action for me to take in this case?

Chances are that you, too, encounter similar situations. For example, you go online to book a flight and you discover an obvious pricing error: what should be a flight costing many hundreds of dollars is listed for just two figures; obviously the person who entered the price into the computer made a typo: instead of three digits, he/she entered only two. Do you take advantage of the situation and quickly purchase that flight, or do you wait until the airline corrects it? By the way, this happened to me quite a few years ago. I was searching for flights to Atlanta for Nancy and me, and a Spirit Airlines fare was listed for $0 – clearly an error. Should I “purchase” the tickets or not? By the way, this occurred before Spirit started charging for baggage and every other “extra”, so it was a real bargain.

We confront moral choices every day. Some may be mundane, but potentially dangerous, for example: Do I come to a full stop at the stop sign? You would think that that would be a simple choice to make. But as a biker, walker, and occasional jogger, I see first-hand that many people apparently cannot make the proper choice. I cannot begin to count how many people barely stop at stop signs, even those near schools. If I could have a dollar for every driver I see ignoring the stop signs near Woodland Middle School, like those at the corner of Chaladay Lane and Bethlynn Court, or the ones on Chaladay and Cynthia, or any of the stop signs on Wenwood or Bruce, I would be a very wealthy man by now.

There are many other moral dilemmas we might encounter. For example: Is it okay to take home a company’s office supplies, items like pens or pads of paper, or to mail personal mail from the company postage machine? Or, a family member or a colleague leaves his/her email page open on his/her computer. Is it okay if I go over and take a look? Or, some lady at the supermarket is offering free samples of a product; should I eat one even if I have absolutely no intention of ever purchasing the item? The ATM machine gave me an extra $20 bill because two bills stuck together. Do I return it to the bank? Is it okay for me to laugh at a racist or sexist joke? Or, you’re 61 years old, but the age for buying a movie ticket with the senior citizen discount is 62; do you lie about your age to buy the cheaper ticket? Similarly, you are 64 1/2 , but the age for buying a senior citizen priced ticket on the Long island Railroad is 65. You know that the odds of the conductor asking for proof of your senior citizen status is minimal; do you purchase the cheaper ticket? Do I report someone who has committed the academic sin of plagiarism? This last question, incidentally, recently confronted our daughter, Aviva. An undergraduate student who did some numbers crunching and statistical analysis for an academic paper that Aviva herself wrote, submitted Aviva’s paper for, and as, *his* senior research project. He removed Aviva’s name as the chief author and inserted his own name, relegating Aviva to a footnote. He was awarded his B.A. with “Honors Distinction in Research.” That student is now in medical school. Other than pursuing the matter at his former college, should Aviva report him as a plagiarizer to his medical school, possibly derailing his medical career?

As I said, every day we confront all varieties of situations in which we must make a moral and ethical choice. I know that I want to follow the prophet Micah’s teaching that we should “do justice.” That is one of my life goals: to always make the right moral and ethical decision. I hope that you, too, will make it one of yours. In everything we do, we must act justly, even when it means our own material loss. It will be to our spiritual betterment.

The second part of Micah’s statement which I hope we all make one of our personal goals is אהבת חסד – loving kindness. Micah’s wording is quite deliberate: he does not say עשות חסד -- doing kindness; Micah demands more: he demands that we love performing acts of kindness.

There are many ways we can show kindness to others: visiting the sick or homebound, helping to fill a grave at a funeral, making a shiva call, donating food to a food bank or clothing to the needy, going out of our way to do someone a favor, speaking kindly of others, giving someone the benefit of the doubt, and the like.

Loving and performing acts of kindness is much more than giving צדקה, or charity. As the Talmud highlights, גמילות חסדים – performing acts of kindness – is greater than charity in three ways. Giving צדקה involves only our money; גמילות חסדים – performing acts of kindness involves not only money, but also our whole being. Generally speaking, צדקה is given only to the needy; acts of kindness should be performed for anybody and everybody, no matter a person’s status or station in life. צדקה is given only to the living, but גמילות חסדים is performed for the living and the dead.

Later this morning, after the Avodah service in which we will verbally reenact the rituals that used to be performed by the Kohen Gadol – the High Priest – when our Temple stood in Jerusalem, we will read from our supplementary booklets the story of Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Yehoshua. One day these two Sages were walking past the ruins of the Temple in Jerusalem. Rabbi Yehoshua burst into tears upon seeing the destroyed Temple. “Woe are we,” he exclaimed, “For the place where we obtained atonement for our sins is gone.”

Rabbi Yochanan comforted Rabbi Yehoshua by telling him, “Do not weep, my son, for God has given us another way to obtain forgiveness for our sins; it is by performing acts of kindness for others. Just as God is gracious and compassionate, we must be gracious and compassionate. We must help the needy bride, visit the sick, attend to the dead, comfort the bereaved. We must share our bread with the hungry, provide shelter for the homeless, clothe the naked, and never turn away from those in need. We must help those who have no help, be eyes to the blind, be feet to the lame. What is hateful to us, we must never do to another. We must love our neighbor as ourselves. We must bring harmony where there is strife, we must try to reconcile those who are estranged, and pursue peace with others.

I want to make one of my life goals the performance of גמילות חסדים – acts of kindness on a much more regular basis, and I hope you will make this one of your goals, too. How wonderful it would be if all of us could find the opportunity to perform one mitzvah, in the sense of good deed, each and every day. It could be something as simple as warmly greeting a person whom you generally ignore, or offering someone a compliment, or even being forgiving if someone has hurt your feelings in some way. All of us can become better people and help create a better society one little step at a time, if we would embrace Micah’s teaching and love kindness.

Micah’s third prescription that I want to make a goal is הצנע לכת עם אלהיך -- to walk humbly with God. But what does “to walk humbly with God” mean? Even the traditional Jewish commentaries fail, in my opinion, to offer a full explanation, so allow me to share what I think it means, and how I derived it.

First, “to walk”. To me that means that I have to do something active; after all, Micah does not tell us to sit humbly with God. To walk humbly with God denotes that I must be an active participant in this relationship with God.

Second, “humbly”. We all know what it means to be humble, but I want to make two comments in this regard. First, humble is a word we should never apply to ourselves. How many of you had to read *David Copperfield* in high school? (Do students read *David Copperfield* anymore?) In my day, *David Copperfield* was required reading, and I remember the character of Uriah Heep. If you recall, Uriah Heep was always declaring himself to be “An ‘umble man.” Of course, by the end of the book we discover that Uriah Heep is anything but humble. The Hebrew word Micah uses here for “humbly” denotes something quiet and hidden, not something we boast about concerning ourselves.

Second, humility should not be confused with low self-esteem. In the Bible, humility means that we acknowledge that God is supreme and omnipotent, and that we humans are, in comparison to God and His might, practically insignificant. But Biblical humility connotes that we humans – as insignificant as we might be – are also of incredible importance, that that all of us are holy, special, and of infinite value, and that each human being is capable of achieving so much. This is the Biblical view of humility: the paradox between knowing that God is all-powerful and we are insignificant on the one hand, and that we are of infinite importance and unbounded opportunity on the other.

“To walk humbly with God.” The preposition “with” implies that I am a partner with God, and He with me; we are with each other – not behind, not in front, not above, not below; we are, so to speak, side by side.

So to put it all together, what do I think “walking humbly with God” means?

Before I tell you, I want you to imagine that you and a close friend are strolling together along a quiet lane or a path in the woods. You are strolling side by side, next to each other. Let me ask you a question: What is happening as the two of you walk together? Chances are you are talking, listening to each other, sharing confidences, sharing your innermost thoughts and feelings. You are enveloped in a kind of warmth, harmony, tranquility, camaraderie, intimacy, and trust, totally focused on each other. Of course, I am being old-fashioned here. Today, both of you would probably have your smart phones out, checking your email or instant messaging someone else. Right? To walk humbly with God is to allow God to walk next to you, to talk to you, to listen to you, to share your innermost thoughts in an undisturbed setting. To walk humbly with God is to feel that warmth, that harmony, that tranquility, that camaraderie, that intimacy, and that trust that comes from being totally focused on each other. I realize that that is incredibly hard to achieve – to feel God’s presence. But if we really try, God will respond. As I said in last year’s Yom Kippur sermon, I am sure that God finds it pretty lonely to be God. I am convinced that God would love to find human walking partners, with whom He can converse and with whom He can have a relationship.

When you go walking with someone, what else happens? Pretty quickly you begin not only to keep pace with each other, but to match each other stride for stride; you get into an “in synch” rhythm with each other. That is another aspect of “walking humbly with God.” It means that I try to get my life in synch with God and with what God wants from me. It involves my being open to hearing God’s voice. Very often, at least for us Jews, we can hear God’s voice in the words of the Torah and our other sacred Jewish texts. Whenever we study a Jewish text, God is speaking to us. We must be open to that message, and the guidance God offers us via the mitzvot and commandments. “Walking humbly with God” means that I acknowledge that God knows what is best for me, and that I should follow His precepts and teachings.

And, of course, walking humbly with God should affect my actions in another way. If God is walking with me, then He can see everything I do, every action I take. I might think that I can do something wrong, trespass a commandment, commit a sin, or engage in some other nefarious type of behavior; and I might think that no one is watching, that no one will see me commit this wrong, but, if God is walking at my side, He is always watching what I do. To walk humbly with God is to live that reality: to know that wherever you go, whatever you do, God is there – and behave accordingly.

So there you have them, my three long-term goals:

עֲשׂ֤וֹת מִשְׁפָּט֙ – to do justice, to act morally and ethically in everything I do;

וְאַ֣הֲבַת חֶ֔סֶד—to love kindness, and to perform even small acts of kindness every single day;

וְהַצְנֵ֥עַ לֶ֖כֶת עִם־אֱלֹהֶֽיךָ:- to feel as if God is walking at my side, that God is speaking to me, and then modeling my behavior on that knowledge.

I think that this a terrific prescription for how to live our lives, and sure beats Wally’s long-term goal of death. I hope that I can achieve these goals, and I hope that you will consider making these your long-term goals as well. Together, may we make our lives spiritually richer and significant.

Shanah tovah!