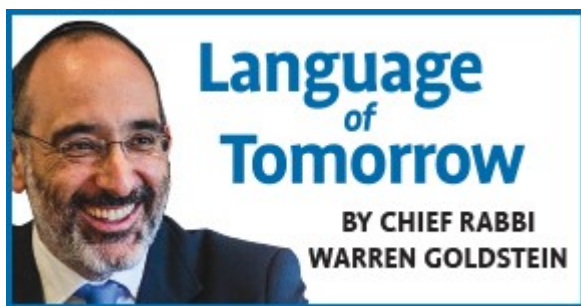


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The Connection Between Lego and Mitzvot

Constructive play for children involves making things no one has ever seen before. It involves taking basic building blocks or shapes and creating something new, something imaginative and creative. In short, something that is an expression of the children themselves. Constructive play serves to focus the minds of children, leading them to invent and discover new possibilities.

The benefits are extraordinary. Studies show that constructive play enhances spatial awareness, encourages critical thinking and reasoning, improves focus and patience, helps develop maths and science skills, boosts language and literacy, and builds confidence.

Perhaps one reason why the effects of construction toys on young minds is so powerful

and far-reaching is that life itself is about building. What we build changes over the years - we go from building toy tractors and robots to building families and friendships, homes and careers, knowledge and understanding, reputation and legacy. And our construction play only ends the day we leave this world.

Interestingly, the Mishna refers to great Torah scholars as "builders". The Talmud (Shabbat 114a) says this is because Torah scholars are involved in the building of the world. Rav Yerucham Levovitz explains that every mitzvah is a separate building block in perfecting the world, and in constructing the unique masterpiece that is our lives. Each action towards the fulfilment of a mitzvah is another brick in the edifice, which is made up of all of these good deeds created both in this world and the next world. Through mitzvot we are able to build an edifice of spirituality and morality in this world, and an edifice of reward in the next world. Life is a process of building, brick by brick, mitzvah by mitzvah, action by action.

This week's parsha discusses the mitzvah of building an altar, a mizbeiach, to God. It specifies that this altar cannot be made out of a single rock or slab of stone, in Hebrew a matzeiva. Rather, it must comprise various pieces of stone, constructed together to create the edifice. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that whereas a solid piece of rock represents the natural, God-given state of the world, the altar, assembled piecemeal, is a testament to human effort and ingenuity. He says life is not about what God gives to us, but rather what we give to God. Of course, it is important to recognise God's hand in nature, to

appreciate the balance and beauty of the natural world, and acknowledge all of the tools and opportunities that God has blessed us with. But, the ultimate purpose of life is to use everything that God has given us to serve Him.

The heart and soul of Judaism is the concept of "mitzvah". A mitzvah isn't just a good deed; it's more accurately translated as a "commandment". The purpose of life as a Jew is to follow the will of Hashem through the mitzvot; to serve Him with everything that we have. Of course, there are many blessings that come from a life dedicated to serving God - hope and faith, peace and tranquillity, purpose and a sense of personal and spiritual fulfilment. But, these are simply the natural by-products. Judaism's focus is on the service itself, service for its own sake. Rabbi Hirsch says our central mission in life is to build the world in its entirety as an altar to serve God, to dedicate our existence to the One who created us.

It is interesting to note that for the Temple service, we use a *mizbeich*, an altar constructed from multiple stones, yet for a tombstone, we use a *matzeiva*, a solid piece of rock. Why is that? Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, in his commentary on this week's parsha, explains that the altar built from multiple stones represents a work in progress, while the solid piece of rock represents completed work. While we are alive on this earth, our lives are a work in progress. We are in this world to toil, to accumulate as many mitzvot as possible, to build, brick by brick, a beautiful edifice bearing testament to a productive, fulfilling, meaningful life. Only when we leave this world is our task complete -

represented by the complete, fully formed slab of stone that is our tombstone.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avot says: "A single moment of repentance and good deeds in this world is greater than all of the World to Come, and a single moment of bliss in the World to Come is greater than all of this world." This world is a world of doing. The world of the *mizbeach*. We need to use our time on this earth to build, to accumulate as many mitzvot as possible, because they are all we will take with us when we leave it. In the next world, the world of the *matzeiva*, there is no doing, no building, only being. Indeed, the reward and the tranquillity of spirit can only be fully realised in the next world. This world is filled with the turbulence of doing and creating and fulfilling mitzvot. The next is the world of rest and of receiving reward. This is the world of the *mizbeach*, of the altar, of building brick by brick. The next is the world of the *matzeiva*, the completed work.

Our work is never complete while we are alive. Our work in this world never ends, there is no concept of spiritual retirement. The Talmud relates how Rabbi Akiva, who, in his old age, lost 24 000 students to a plague, and began again from scratch, rebuilding his yeshiva with five students. There is so much to do, so much we can do - so many opportunities to build. Our lives are always a work in progress.

Only when we leave this world for the next do we finally get to enjoy the fruits of our labour. But, there's also a sense of loss in not being able to achieve anything else, in no longer having the opportunity to build and do mitzvot. There's an interesting halacha that a man who

visits the cemetery should tuck in his tzitzit so they cannot be seen, out of sensitivity to those who have left this world and no longer have the opportunity to perform mitzvot.

We, on the other hand, have that opportunity. We have mitzvot and we have life. We have the raw materials, and we are expected to do something with them, to build something. Something only we can build, and that enables us to fulfil our sense of purpose. The altar of our lives is waiting to be built.



The Family Parsha
By Nesanel Yoel Safran
Lessons, stories and discussion questions for parents and kids

Live Like a King

From this week's Torah Portion

Did you ever think about what it would be like to be a king? In ancient times, many kings could have and do anything they wanted. But in this week's Torah portion, we learn about the Jewish king and how differently he had to act. God tells him to be moderate and not to gather up too much treasure or other things of pleasure for himself. While God wants us to enjoy the good things of the world, we shouldn't get too carried away by them. There can be too much of a good thing. Even a king has to behave with moderation, and all the more so, everyone else.

Story

In our story, a boy shows his friends the value of choosing moderation.

"SCOOP OF THE CENTURY"

It was Akiva's birthday and his friends surprised him by taking him out to "The Big Scream" ice cream parlor. Famous in the city, the "Big Scream" had more than 100 flavors of ice cream and even more kinds of sundaes and milk shakes. The biggest sundae -- the "ice berg" -- was so big that the waiter had to bring out a special table just to hold it for anyone who ordered it.

Akiva was happy his friends had thought of him and tried to play along. As he scanned the huge 20-page menu, his friends eagerly egged him on.

"Go for it!" said his friend, Motty. "You're king for the day -- get whatever you want!"

"Yeah, get an 'ice-berg,'" said another. "We'll all watch you sink it -- or it sink you!"

Soon the waiter appeared. He introduced himself as Fred. "What'll it be guys?" he asked from behind his colorful sprinkle-mask.

"We'll let the Birthday-King order first," said the boys, pointing to Akiva, who still sat staring thoughtfully into the menu.

The waiter smiled and said, "May I suggest our 'King-sized' double dip chocolate torpedo sundae? Or perhaps an icy-ocean super-sized milkshake?"

Akiva looked up, and in a serious tone, said, "Nope. I'm gonna go for it. Gimme an ice-berg!"

His friends cheered him on and placed their own, more modest orders.

Soon the waiter returned, wheeling out the enormous "ice-berg". With his buddies crowding around, Akiva sunk the special oversized spoon into the middle of the milky mountain, drew it to his lips and smiled. "Delicious. Absolutely delicious," was all he said, whipped cream sitting playfully on the tip of his nose.

Spoonful after spoonful followed as Akiva made his way through the rivers of fudge, the forest of fruit, the tundra of toppings. But soon enough, it became apparent that the "king" was slowing down.

"What's the matter," taunted Motty. "You had enough?"

Akiva looked at his friend defiantly and said, "No way! Never enough of a good thing." But his voice had clearly lost some of its earlier enthusiasm. However, after a few more minutes, Akiva put down his spoon and held his stomach. His eyes looked glassy.

"Hey, aren't you gonna finish your ice-berg?" asked one of the boys. Akiva just shook his head and groaned. "Take it away guys, and please take me home. I think I'm gonna be sick."

"But you're the birthday-king" protested Motty. "Today's Sunday. We've got all day. Next we planned to take you out to a ball-game, then for pizza, then to the beach, and then..."

"Motty," said Akiva, managing a weak smile. "I may be the king for the day, but I feel like a real joker. Next time I think I'll order a smaller *sundae* so I can enjoy the rest of my *Sunday!*"

Discussion Questions

Ages 3-5

Q. How did Akiva feel when the waiter first brought out the huge "ice-berg" sundae that he had ordered?

A. He was really happy and felt like he was going to enjoy eating the whole thing.

Q. Was it a good idea for Akiva to try to eat the whole thing? Why or why not?

A. Because it made him sick and also he couldn't enjoy the rest of his birthday plans.

Ages 6-9

Q. Imagine for a moment that you could have as much as you wanted of your favorite food. Maybe it's a huge vat of popcorn or a bag of chocolate chip cookies. Which bite do you think would taste the best? Why?

A. Probably the very first bite because that's when we are hungry and our taste buds are on high alert. After a while, we fill up and then we no longer taste the food; we are just stuffing ourselves. That's known as too much of a good thing -- what the Torah portion warns against. To really enjoy things, it's necessary to be fully aware of what you are doing -- or eating.

Q. Physical pleasures are great, if we have them in moderation. Can you think of other kinds of pleasures that don't wear off so fast over time, and that we just enjoy more and more?

A. Certain pleasures such as love or learning something we're interested in, or understanding more and more about life can be like that. Or the pleasure we feel in helping others and doing acts of kindness. These spiritual pleasures are deeper and more long lasting.

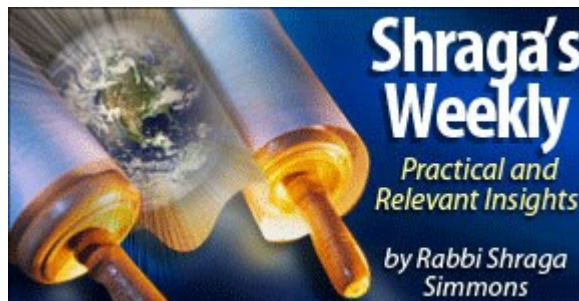
Ages 10 and Up

Q. Some people claim that we should try to grab as much physical pleasure in the world as we can. "Eat drink and be merry," they say, because that's all there is. Others claim all such material pleasures are "sinful" and we should totally deprive ourselves. Which if any of these philosophies do you agree with?

A. Judaism says: Neither. God wants us to enjoy this world and its pleasures. That's why He created them. But at the same time, He doesn't want us to live just for them. We should partake of the pleasures of the world, but in moderation. If we do that we open ourselves up to appreciate the even greater and more enjoyable spiritual pleasures that make the physical type seem pale in comparison.

Q. Do you agree that moderation is a higher level of willpower and spirituality than either indulgence or total abstinence?

A. When we abstain or fast, we merely "turn off" a part of ourselves and become less aware of the world around us. To indulge without limit also blinds us as we get "lost" in the object of our desires. But moderation means to be "turned on" fully with full awareness of life's pleasures, but still in control. This can be a very high and spiritual feeling.



Life's Most Important Thing

Every person has one thing that he is living for. Let's call it a "**personal bottom line.**" For some it is money, for others prestige, for others pursuit of pleasure. Now let's imagine that you're faced with a situation where you are about to lose everything – your job, your house, your car, even your health and your family (God forbid). But ... you are given the choice to hold onto **one thing**, only one thing. What would it be?

Future Funding

This week we begin the month of Elul. In many respects, this is the most important time of the Jewish year. As the month which immediately precedes the High Holidays, Elul is a crucial period of preparation.

To get started, let's first ask the question: What is Rosh Hashana all about anyway?

Imagine that you are a scientific researcher who is funded through a philanthropic foundation. Each year, you are required to appear before the Board of Directors and present a summation of your achievements during the past year. How much money the board grants you for the coming year will be based on how well you utilized last year's grant – and how solid is your plan for the coming year. Of course, if you've squandered past resources and are unprepared

for the future, your chance of receiving additional grant money is slim.

So, too, on Rosh Hashana. Ever since the creation of Adam and Eve, Rosh Hashana has been the day when every human being (so to speak) is created anew. We stand before our Creator and say: "This is how I have utilized my resources, and this is my plan for the future."

Appreciating the Gift

This is indeed serious business. Life is not to be taken for granted. Life is a precious gift from Above. It is delicate and tenuous and can be taken away at any moment.

The story is told of a sculptor who was commissioned to design a bronze statue of a horse for the town square. After many months of work, he produced a sculpture with perfect detail – showing every sinew and hair follicle. It was truly a masterpiece! However, when the statue was proudly placed in the town square, everyone walked by and completely ignored it! The sculptor was very disappointed to find all his hard work going unappreciated. Finally a friend said: "I think the problem is that the horse is so perfect that people think it's real! But if you would make a crack, then people will notice it as a work of art."

The point of this story, explains the Chasan Sofer, is that our lives are full of blessings. Our eyes alone are worth many millions of dollars! But we mustn't take our "funding" for granted!

A person's relationship with God is similar to that of a parent to a child. For example, what happens when a child asks for a cookie? The parent is glad to give one. But if the child would

show a lack of appreciation (like refusing to say "thank you," or throwing the food on the floor), do you think the parent will give the child another cookie? No way!

Now imagine that the child takes the cookie, and says something to the effect of: "Thank you so much. This cookie is sweet and fresh and delicious. I really appreciate your efforts to get me this cookie." What will the parent say when the child looks up gingerly and asks for a second cookie? "It's my pleasure!"

This Rosh Hashana, will we be able to stand before God with confidence? Only if we have first done significant soul searching – who we are and where we are headed. Because if we don't have such clarity, then how can we expect God (the Board of Directors) to grant us another year of life?!

Personal Bottom Line

There are a few special customs that Jews perform during Elul, to help awaken us to the task ahead. One is the daily recitation of Psalm 27. There, King David exclaims:

"One thing I ask ... is to dwell in the house of God all the days of my life."

King David tells us a tremendous insight: If I was stripped bare and could only choose one thing, it would be You, God. That's the bottom line. A relationship with God supercedes all else, for He is the source of everything. No if's, and's, or but's.

Coming to this realization is what Elul is all about.

Not long ago I was sitting and learning Torah in a synagogue near my home. This synagogue is located in the basement of a large apartment building. (In Israel, the basement of every building is a bomb shelter.)

So I'm sitting in this bomb-shelter-turned-synagogue, and I'm thinking that if ever (God forbid) there should be a war, this bomb shelter would be a good place to be stranded. There's Torah books, scholarly rabbis and holiness permeating the walls. I could gladly spend weeks here!

Then I recalled a time in my life when I was keeping less mitzvot. I had gone out one evening with some friends to hear music at a local tavern. As we were leaving to go home, we discovered that the winds were howling at 100 kilometers an hour and a meter of snow had just fallen. It was a full-fledged blizzard! The streets were shut down and the entire city had come to a grinding halt. Nobody was going anywhere. We were stranded. Snowbound.

I spent the next 48 hours in the tavern with a group of strangers, and I recall at the time considering myself fortunate to be stranded there and not elsewhere. There was so much to keep us entertained: Video games, a pool table, a superb sound system, etc. How grateful I was not to have been stranded in the dentist's office or a gas station!

So recently, when I imagined being stranded in my synagogue bomb shelter, that snowstorm came to mind. Tavern versus Synagogue. The qualitative difference is astounding. Could there be any question? King David's words rang like a

bell: *"One thing I ask is to dwell in the house of God..."*

Policing the Gates

Another special custom for the month of Elul is to blow the Shofar every morning in the synagogue. The Shofar sound is literally an alarm clock designed to arouse us from our spiritual slumber. The Shofar brings clarity, alertness, and focus.

The reason we lose touch and make mistakes is that we don't take the time every day to reconnect with our deepest desires and essence. Therefore, the solution is obvious: Spend time alone everyday to ask: "Am I on track? Am I focused? Am I pursuing goals which will make the greatest overall difference in my life and in the world?"

This week's Parsha begins:

"You shall appoint judges and police for yourself in all your gates." (Deut. 16:18)

The commentators explain this verse metaphorically: You should set guards at "your gates" – i.e. at the openings of your body. Guard your ears from gossip. Guard your mouth from falsehood. Guard your eyes from straying after frivolity.

Elul is the time to construct a sincere, realistic model of where we've fallen short in the past and how we expect to change in the future. May this be a meaningful time of growth for us all.



The Fear of Fear

Fear is one of the most powerful emotions in the human experience and presents itself at some of the most critical junctures in our lives. Whether one is on the brink of making an important decision, waiting to hear news of a loved one or embarking on a new professional path, that familiar, often crippling sentiment courses through a person's veins and preys on the mind, rendering clarity at that moment almost impossible. The Torah, which speaks 'in the language of mankind' (BT, Tractate *Nedarim* 3a), recognises and addresses this.

When preparing for war, a carefully selected priest would approach the soldiers and give the following exhortation, 'Listen, O Israel, today you are drawing near to wage war against your enemies – let your heart not be faint, do not be afraid, do not panic, and do not be broken before them' (*Deut.* 20:3).

The children of Israel are not to fear as God is among them. However, the priest who is responsible for assuaging fears and for building up the nation's bravery and determination then makes a most surprising announcement, exempting three categories of people from military duty: he who is engaged to a woman, but has not yet married her; he who has built a house, but has not yet lived in it; and he who

has built a vineyard, but has not yet drunk from its wine (20:5-9). Although they have to contribute to the war effort through supplying food and water (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Warfare 7:9), these people are not allowed to serve on the front line. What is it about these three groups that exempts them from battle?

As Abraham ibn Ezra points out, the Torah is teaching us a deep lesson about the nature of facing fear, one that applies to our routine lives as much as it does to the soldiers on the battlefield. Wars are waged in our hearts and minds, just as much as on the battlefields. The Torah is showing us the critical role that our emotional psyche can play in impacting our performance on the battlefield and *whether or not our heart is in it is what makes all the difference*.

Two soldiers can be standing next to each other facing their enemy, both feeling the same primordial feelings of physical and psychological terror that accompany mortal danger. The first one is absolutely committed to the mission – he knows that what he is doing at this moment is of cardinal importance to his people, and he is able to confront the fear head-on. Despite his trepidation, he knows that there is nowhere else he should be; and it is precisely this single-minded devotion that gives him the courage to fight. The second soldier, standing in exactly the same position, feels the same fear. He is just as aware as his counterpart, on a cognitive level, that his military task is important. But his heart is elsewhere – perhaps he is thinking about his fiancée, or the fine house he has just finished building, or the financial success that he is about to enjoy from his new vineyard. One who is

preoccupied is unable to confront his fear head-on and it is as if he is not truly there. He is constantly seeking comfort through thoughts of his newly acquired life back home. He repeatedly attempts to mentally escape the danger he is facing through letting his mind wander rather than focusing on what is right in front of him. And a soldier whose heart is not strong and whose mind is not present is a liability not just to himself, but to all those around him.

In our own lives too, we often attempt to deal with our challenges (especially those that induce tremors of fear) through avoidance – conscious or otherwise – and through escaping into our various constructed realities, online or otherwise. While this may allow us to avoid confrontation in the short term, it dooms us in the long term. No soldier can defeat an enemy through retreat and similarly no challenge can be solved through avoidance. In order to overcome the obstacles we face in life, we must be bold enough to tackle them head-on with crystal-clear determination.

‘Courage,’ as Mark Twain said, ‘is the resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear’ (*Pudd’nhead Wilson*). Through the section describing the preparations for war, the Torah teaches us that escapism is more dangerous than any mortal enemy. Our diversions will render us incapable of dispelling the fears that threaten to cloud our lives. But in the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt, ‘the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.’ We must confront our challenges and battles whole-heartedly, secure in the knowledge that this is the only way to grow. Only then, as the priest anointed for

warfare reminds us, will God’s presence enter our lives and join with us in our battle.

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