



Parshat Pekude—Shabbat Shekalim
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What Am I Doing Here?
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The Oscars are tomorrow night. So let me publicly thank Leonardo DiCaprio for embodying the answer to a question that must surely be on many people's minds when they are here on Shabbat morning. But first a story.

Recently I was meeting with a lovely couple, new members to our community, and they were sharing their Jewish journey. He explained that they rarely go to services; they only go if they are invited guests to a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. On those rare occasions when they do go, he finds himself asking the question, "what am I doing here?"

What am I doing here?

Thank you for asking that question. Let me channel this voice.

What am I doing here? The service is mostly in Hebrew, and I don't speak Hebrew.

What am I doing here? The service is mostly praying to God, and I don't know whether I believe in God.

What am I doing here? When I read the Hebrew prayers in translation, they do not connect with me. For example, what am I supposed to do with this prayer:

In thundering chorus, majestic voices resound, lifted toward singing seraphim and responding: Praised is Adonai's glory throughout the universe.

Say what? What does any of this have to do with my life? What is a thundering chorus? What majestic voices? What are singing seraphim anyway?

What am I doing here? The service is 2 and ½ hours. Who does anything for 2 and ½ hours anymore? Yes, Shira and I *did* see the *Wolf of Wall Street*, which *was* 3 hours. But the

truth is that the 3 hour length put me off for a long time. And while we finally saw it, *it was a one-shot deal*. I'm never seeing the *Wolf of Wall Street* again. And yet Judaism asks us to come to a 2 and ½ hour service every week that is substantially the same.

What am I doing here? The question, the skepticism, the edge, I can totally understand. In the Pew study 86% of American Jews report that they do not attend services regularly.

That's where Leonardo DiCaprio comes in.

When we first meet Leonardo DiCaprio's Jordan Belfort, he is a modest 20-something who comes from a solid middle class background. He is married to a nice local girl, and they live in a small apartment. Then he hits it big by starting his own financial services firm, which sells worthless penny stocks to unsophisticated buyers. He makes many millions of dollars, and his character is transformed. He divorces his first wife for a glamorous second wife. He cheats on his second wife. He becomes a drug addict. He wastes money lavishly. He is ultimately convicted of numerous crimes, for which he does hard time.

Now you may think that Jordan Belfort's story is Hollywood. It is about high flying wheeler dealers on Wall Street, not about us.

But our rabbis would teach us that Jordan Belfort, albeit in an extreme form, *is* indeed about us.

For our rabbis teach that each of us has two sides of our character that live in constant tension. Our *yetzer hatov*, our lofty and lovely side, and our *yetzer harah*, our snarky and snarly side. It's all about me. I am the center of the universe. *In tension with* It's not all about me. I hold grudges. I never forget. I have a memory like an elephant. *In tension with* I forgive. I fly off the handle *in tension with* I am imperturbable. I give in to the desire of the moment *in tension with* I show self-restraint. All these instincts are in perpetual play. There is no Hebrew word for

the English word face, singular. There is only *panim*, faces. Plural. Each of us is a messy medley of faces. On any given day, what kind of human being will we be?

Judaism responds to our messy human nature. Its purpose is *letzaref et habriot*, to purify us, to get our best self to emerge. That's also why we do shul.

Shul is not mainly about God. It is mainly about us. We reach out to God to bring out our best self.

The urgent question is *not* what am I doing *here*, in *shul*. Rather, what am I doing here with my life? Robert Frost famously once observed that all of life can be summarized in just three words: it goes on. We see that here this morning. Just yesterday Kaylee and Julia were born. Now they are radiant b'not mitzvah. *Our* life goes on.

Shul is about taking a few hours to step back, to ask what we want out of our life and whether we are reaching it? When else do we have the luxury of that kind of reflection? While we are stuck in traffic commuting? While we're juggling 100 things at work? While we're trying to get dinner on the table at the end of the day? While we're answering emails that never end? Asking ourselves the big questions does not happen unless we make it happen. This place is where we make it happen.

That brings me back to Jordan Belfort. The movie is based on a true story, the autobiography of Jordan Belfort, this book, called The Wolf of Wall Street. What does not come out in the movie, but does in the book, is that Jordan Belfort is Jewish. I found that fascinating. What was the impact of his Judaism on who he turned out to be? I scoured the book for references. And the answer is, while he happened to be Jewish, he led an unexamined life. In this whole book, there is not one modicum of Jordan Belfort asking himself what am I doing here?

Jordan Belfort did not go to shul. He was a man on the make, too busy to think about things. And his life was not the better for it.

Yes, Jordan Belfort is an extreme. But he is also a cautionary tale on what happens to a life bereft of reflection because we are too busy living to stop to think. That is not uncommon. That is not just about Jordan Belfort, as I learned this past Wednesday morning.

I had been contacted by a high school senior at Milton Academy, one of our members, who had had her Bat Mitzvah right here just 5 years ago, to see if I would do a teaching in a school assembly for 10th, 11th and 12th graders. This is exactly the age cohort that we are so focused on here at the shul, looking for a third rabbi who could connect with our teens after their bnei mitzvah. She told me I could teach anything I wanted. So I decided to talk to these teens about themselves, their busy days, their heavy schedules, their inner lives. Their exams. Their papers. Their college applications. The stresses of their performances, whether on the sports field or the stage or the concert hall. I asked them: facing all that, do you have a core, of who you are that nobody else can own, that your teacher cannot own, that your coach cannot own, that your guidance counselor cannot own, that the admissions committee cannot own? Do you have a way to preserve and strengthen your core, your essential you, that is not about how you perform?

I introduced Shabbat, a day of rest when we set aside the exams, the papers, the college applications, the stresses; a day when we own our own lives; a day when we are not on the make; a day when, as Harold Kushner put it, you cannot be late. I asked them: Do you have Shabbat?

In a crowded school gym, with teens crowded onto the bleachers, there was an awkward silence. No student raised a hand. Finally Lou offered that he tries to take Sunday morning off, but he never can. Too much clutter gets in the way. Then Charlie raised his hand. He tries to take a couple of hours off on Tuesday night, to play some music, but he cannot always do it.

A crowded room of stressed out teens, working, striving, reaching. Seven days a week. Sharpen your pencil. Test, test, test. Tie your shoe laces. Run, run, run. Open up your essay for the umpteenth time. Edit, edit, edit. No Shabbat. No time to renew. Lots of energy. Not lots of reflecting on the meaning of our lives.

This is a teen problem. But this is not only a teen problem. This is all of our problem. We all need Shabbat; too few of us have it. We all need prayerful reflection in this sacred space; too few of us have it. George Bernard Shaw once famously observed that the only person who really knew him was his tailor, because his tailor took fresh measurements every time. His tailor knew he wasn't stuck. His tailor allowed for him to change. Do we do for ourselves what George Bernard Shaw's tailor did for him? That's what we can do here.

The question, what are we doing here, is powerful.

But the answer is more powerful. What we are doing here is trying to be the best human being we can be, and we don't have forever. Shabbat shalom.