

## **Giving up the *more* and *faster* story**

Falling in love is I'm afraid an occupational hazard of a rabbi. Whenever I am introduced to a new text I am in risk at falling in love with it. I get so enamored that I have to copy the text, print it and stick it in several different notebooks in case I should ever forget it. This year I fell deeply in love with an unassuming, small book which is also loved by many more people than just me.... 'The Little Prince' by Antoine De Saint-Exupery. The reason I fell in love with this book and the character of the Little Prince is that they offer a way of looking at the world that is so at odds with the prevalent attitude in our society which values efficiency, speed and productivity above all else. The Little Prince, instead, takes time to notice what is around him, to engage and simply 'be' rather than 'do' and thus fosters deep and meaningful relationships.

There is one scene, when the Little Prince is touring nearby planets to his home, that typifies these two divergent attitudes. He comes to a small planet which is taken up entirely with a man sat behind a desk who is studying a piece of paper before him. The man is counting and after the Little Prince manages to interrupt him he learns that the man is counting the stars. To indulge us all I'll read a little adapted extract from the book. The Little Prince asks:

***"And what do you do with five-hundred millions of stars?"***

*"Five-hundred-and-one million, six-hundred-twenty-two thousand, seven-hundred-thirty-one. I am concerned with matters of consequence: I am accurate."*

***"And what do you do with these stars?"***

*"What do I do with them?"*

***"Yes."***

*"Nothing. I own them."*

***"You own the stars?"***

*"Yes."*

***..."And what good does it do you to own the stars?"***

*"It does me the good of making me rich."*

***"And what good does it do you to be rich?"***

*"It makes it possible for me to buy more stars, if any are discovered..."*

***"But you cannot pluck the stars from heaven . . ."***

"No. But I can put them in the bank."

**"Whatever does that mean?"**

"That means that I write the number of my stars on a little paper. And then I put this paper in a drawer and lock it with a key."

..."**It is entertaining,**" thought the little prince. "**It is rather poetic. But it is of no great consequence.**"

On matters of consequence, the little prince had ideas which were very different from those of the grown-ups....

**"The grown-ups are certainly altogether extraordinary,"** he said simply, talking to himself as he continued on his journey.

In this wonderful dialogue we see the Little Prince utterly confounded by the businessman's logic – his need to count the stars, to be accurate, to be rich, to consume, to own, to be important. For the Little Prince, we learn later, what is essential – what is truly important – what is *of consequence* – is that which is invisible. As he says, '**it is only with the heart that one can see rightly**'. He invests, not in commodities, but in relationships.

We must all be aware of the fast-moving, instantaneous nature of the world around us. One of my teachers, Justin Wise, talks about this story of *more* and *faster* and urges us to give it up. He writes, '*It is time to step out of the **more** and **faster** story. Give up wearing your busyness as a badge of honour, so that you can discover a new way of doing what matters*'.<sup>1</sup>

Constantly measuring ourselves against our productivity and our to-do lists is an utterly exhausting task. It is also never-ending – there will always be more to do, more to have – the to do list expands with every item we tick off. The writer Alan Lew says that, 'we never rest...we have phones in our cars. We have call waiting, so that even our interruptions are interrupted. Even those small moments of contemplation – of *nefesh*, of nothingness – we used to enjoy on vacation or even just driving back and forth between errands, even these are denied us.'<sup>2</sup>

As a rabbinic phrase goes – *ein le-davar sof* – there is no end to it. The rabbis use this phrase at the end of a particularly detailed conversation in the Talmud about some legal minutiae [bPesachim 9a]. As one rabbi asks another fantastical, hypothetical question – 'but what if....?' – the rabbis interject and say, *ein le-davar sof* – this is endless – there is no

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<sup>1</sup> <https://justinwise.co.uk/2013/11/>. Subscribe to Justin Wise's blog here - <https://justinwise.co.uk/>

<sup>2</sup> Alan Lew, 'This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared', p.120.

end. And the conversation stops. They recognize there is a limit and that talking for the sake of talking, buying for the sake of owning, trading for the sake of being rich – *ein le-davar sof* – there is no end.

Of course, hidden beneath our drive for greater productivity and efficiency is the belief that each individual is their own world. The ‘I’ comes before the ‘we’. The self is supreme. The selfie rules and we become consumers, not only in the shops, but with each other. We become commodities.<sup>3</sup> Everything we do is a transaction – what can I give in order to receive. Is this worth my while? We are, as the businessman said, concerned only with matters of consequence. As Justin Wise says, *‘we have abandoned reflection and replaced it with busyness. We’ve abandoned sitting quietly with ourselves and replaced it with consuming.’* We live, not in the moment, but ahead of ourselves, always running, always chasing.

Of course, business and being busy are wholly necessary and anyone who has experienced loneliness will know that having things to do and places to go is fundamental to our existence. And, as Jews, we are not ascetics who forgo worldly pleasures – in fact we are encouraged to live life fully. But what I think Yom Kippur cautions us against is the danger of becoming obsessed with ourselves, our objects, and achieving – as we stand here and leave the material world behind us by fasting etc., we gain perspective on ourselves and our roles. We are persuaded to ‘look at the world as something we are in, not something which was made for us’.<sup>4</sup> We are, as our liturgy reminds us, time and time again, *‘clay in the hands of the potter’, ‘stone in the hands of the mason’*. We are like grass that withers and dies but, we extol, *‘how great and manifold are Your works, God’*.

And this work, of seeing that we part of something much greater, of understanding that ‘it is the journey that matters in the end and not the end itself’<sup>5</sup>, of investing in relationships and not making ourselves and others into objects – all of this is urgent work. We are, to use a phrase by the songwriter Leslie Edgar, ruled by ‘the tyranny of the next minute’.

Our children are tested at younger and younger ages, we place productivity above the safety and security of our workers, we farm so intensively that we do not notice the

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<sup>3</sup> Erich Fromm, *‘The Essential Fromm: Life Between Having and Being’*, Kindle Ed., Edited and foreword by Rainer Funk, location 229.

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Leaman on Maimonides.

<sup>5</sup> Ursula Le Guin, *‘The Left Hand of Darkness’*.

threat to the humble, wondrous bee, we work and we work and we work – *ein le-davar sof* – there is no end. We are as the Little Prince exclaims, ‘extraordinary’. We are in danger of never resting, of never just being – as Alan Lew reminds us, ‘when we human beings run down, we simply plunge into nothingness. We sleep. Nothing happens to us when we sleep, and it is precisely this nothing that restores us.’<sup>6</sup> We must heed Justin Wise’s call to step aside from the *more* and *faster* story. We must step aside from the businessman in The Little Prince and his insistence on accuracy and ownership. Instead we could listen to the Little Prince who teaches us that what is essential is invisible to the eye. We can learn from our liturgy, our texts, that urge us to see what is before us and realise that we are all part of something much greater as we continue with our day to day lives.

For this Yom Kippur and for the year ahead may we utilise our times of rest with the Shabbat and our Chaggim. And outside of them, may we slow down, may we even be inefficient and unproductive. May we gaze at the stars, rather than count them. Ken Yehi Ratzon – may this be God’s will. Amen.

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*Kol Nidrei, 5778*

### **Reading**

*Alan Lew – ‘This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation’, New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2003.*

*Erich Fromm – ‘The Essential Fromm: Life Between Having and Being’, Kindle Ed., Edited and foreword by Rainer Funk.*

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<sup>6</sup> Alan Lew, p.121.