

Good Yontif and Shana Tova,

As the story goes, a prominent Rabbi dies and goes to heaven. As he's approaching the gates, he hears a band of singing and dancing angels approach, and begins to get excited. The lead angel approaches the Rabbi and asks if he would mind stepping aside for a moment. Shocked, the Rabbi does so. The angels march out of the gates and encircle a man who is surprised to say the least for this man is an Egged bus driver. The joyous parade of angels carry the bus driver in ahead of the Rabbi.

When the parade is gone, an angel returns to the Rabbi and says, "You can come in now." The angel begins to lead the Rabbi inside alone. The Rabbi, somewhat confused, says, "I'm not one to make waves or anything, but I need to know something. I think I've been a good Rabbi. I've worked hard all my life. I've taken care of my congregation and congregants to the best of my ability. I've even tried to lead a full life. Nu? So tell me why is it an Egged bus driver gets led in by a band of angels ahead of me?" The angel says, "Well, frankly, Rabbi, whenever you preached, people slept. But whenever he drove, people prayed."

This story certainly challenges the notion of what it means to live a full life. Could it be a bus driver lives a fuller life than a rabbi? A question for the sages perhaps, but an important one we should be asking nonetheless. What does it mean to live a full life? Does it mean looking back with pride at one's accomplishments? Does it mean being content with one's current circumstance? Or is it a little bit of both?

It would seem that almost no one loves answering these questions more than Hollywood. Recently filmmakers have been focusing on giving us movies with characters that have the opportunity to live life to the fullest even as the end of their days draws near.

With this in mind, in January of 2008, a little movie was released that became a pretty significant box office success. It sold approximately 175 million in tickets and made another 35 million in DVD sales. Despite this commercial success, what made the movie even more significant was the lasting impression it left on our collective vernacular. Ever since this movie's release, people have been talking about their "Bucket List"

The Bucket List starred two of the most famous leading men in Hollywood, Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman. Jack Nicholson has close to 80 films under his belt including an astounding three total Oscars wins for both Best Actor and best Supporting Actor. Some of my favorite Nicholson movies are One Flew over the Coo'oo's Nest, The Shining, Batman, As Good as it Gets, and The Departed.

Morgan Freeman has appeared in over 90 movies and television shows including an uncredited appearance early in his career in The Pawnbroker a movie from the 60's that paved the way for future Holocaust movies to be made. Mr. Freeman has also appeared in one of my all time favorites The Shawshank Redemption, which I feel really should have won the Academy Award for Best Picture over Forest Gump. He has also done lots of voice over work and acted in Nurse Betty, Amistad, and the past two Batman movies: Batman Begins and The Dark Knight.

So as you can see, these two men have connections to each other through Stephen King who wrote both the Shining and the Shawshank Redemption, as well as appearing in Batman movies, though not in the same ones. But I digress...

The Bucket List is a movie about two men suffering from terminal illnesses who 'escape' from a cancer ward determined to do everything on Morgan Freeman's character's bucket list, meaning things he wants to do before he 'kicks the bucket.' This list included skydiving, race car driving, and even climbing the pyramids.

Ever since this movie came out, people both celebrity and civilian alike have been discussing their bucket lists. I am torn by this concept because though I think it is great to always have goals and potential accomplishments percolating, I would be leery of any 'must do before I die' list.

That being said, there are some things I do hope to accomplish over my life. As an avid SCUBA diver, I would love the opportunity to dive Australia's Great Barrier Reef as well as the Red Sea. I am even hoping to dive with the Great White Sharks. Though my wife is not such a fan of the third one, and I may have to make sure my life insurance is up to date before she lets me enter the water with Jaws.

I would like to finish that novel I began working on years ago before the kids were born. Just don't ask me what it is about because for the life of me, I can't remember. I would also like to visit Alaska before the glaciers disappear, run a half marathon, and see my beloved Astros win a World Series.

But in terms of other would like to dos: aside from having a wonderful family, I have had the chance to play in a three rock bands including two tefillah bands. I have met celebrities like Ben and Jerry and Alton Brown. And I even ran into Jake Gyllenhall at a frozen yogurt stand in Los Angeles. Though I would like to note how all my celebrity encounters seem to involve food.

I also almost met Kinky Friedman, who I just missed by two minutes. His parents happen to own a summer camp in central Texas. I still await the chance to meet Steven Spielberg and Baltimore's own Duff Goldman, there's the food connection again. I have seen my Longhorns win and lose a national championship. I have made home movies, climbed a ropes course tower on several occasions, blogged on all things randomly Jewish, seen the entirety of New York from the observatory tower of the Empire State Building, gazed into the

depths of the Grand Canyon, gone diving with sting rays, and davened at the kotel, the Wailing Wall.

So if I was comparing my list of dos to would like to do, I would say it is a pretty impressive list already, just awaiting many more additions.

But this got me to thinking, if we were to describe our fair congregation, what sort of list would we come up with? What would we like to see on our congregation's to do or would like to do list?

In many ways our first priority is to continue to build upon the fertile foundation of community established at Har Sinai over the past one hundred and sixty plus years here in Baltimore with our vision also on the future of our congregation. However there is a caveat, when it comes to the future, all bets are off. No one knows this better than Decca Records who said, 'We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out.' This statement was in response to a record they received from a small band we know today as the Beatles. Or as was written on a term paper for an economics class, "The concept is interesting and well-formed, but in order to earn better than a 'C,' the idea must be feasible." -- A Yale University management professor in response to Fred Smith's paper proposing reliable overnight delivery service. (Smith, in case you were wondering, went on to found Federal Express).

Now I am certainly not comparing us to the Beatles or Federal Express, but as these examples demonstrate, it is hard to say which ideas will work until we try them out.

With this in mind, I would like to put forth a few ideas we will be playing with this coming year. First and foremost one of the key elements we take a lot of pride in here at Har Sinai is our proud musical tradition. It is a tradition that has been built up with the assistance of our Cantor, choir, and wonderful accompanist. With this in mind we are planning on adding to

this tradition. Some worship experiences like our First Friday service are very much going to remain as you know them and love them. But we will also be striving to establish an in-house Rock Band to play at our soon-to-be named Shabbat Rocks! Services, which will be in lieu of our simcha Shabbat celebrations. We are also looking to continue to add to our musical repertoire to continue to push our engagement with the Divine for there is little comparable to the heart's desire to shout out in a wellspring of musical joy. Thus we will continue to be looking for ways to add to our musical heritage together.

With the help of our new director of family programming and religious school director, we are looking to expand upon our family educational and programmatic opportunities as well. From opening up our kindergarten and first grade classes to all comers, to our new monthly Tot Shabbat services, and religious school services to family learning, and intergenerational explorations we are looking to get more families and more young families involved and connected with our congregation. For Judaism begins in the home, and it is a central mitzvah to teach our tradition to our children.

But we also recognize that Judaism in many ways is an adult tradition meant to be contemplated and studied. With this in mind we are very much going to keep focusing on adult learning opportunities including Torah study, guest lectureships, book groups, and we are even going to try out a Tu B'shevat Wine Tasting and Seder this coming winter, assuming both the weather and wine varietals hold.

We are also very excited about our second Torah siyyum coming up at the beginning of December in conjunction with Hanukkah. The term Hanukkah means 'rededication,' and what better time to dedicate or rededicate our 300 year old Heritage Torah than on this amazing festival especially in the presence of our congregation's youth. And if you haven't had a chance

to participate in the Torah dedication project or would like to participate again, just let us know. Be it buying a single letter or a whole Torah, your commitment to this wonderful project helps not only Har Sinai, but will also help to ensure that this foundation of Jewish life will be able to continue on being chanted from and studied for generations to come.

And there are also other ideas percolating as well. For example we are in the very preliminary process of looking to take a congregational trip to Israel in the spring of 2012 in conjunction with ARZA and our ARZA committee as a way of helping us feel a sense of connection to our people's Holy Land.

So as you can see, there is a lot on tap. All of this is done in mind with a recent presentation that was done for the council of committee chairs by Neil Rubin editor of the Baltimore Jewish Times about Jewish demographics with an emphasis on the demographics here in Baltimore.

The take away points he had was to focus less on outreach and more on building our base, meaning all of you. To get you more excited and more involved with your congregation. To do this, Mr. Rubin suggested what he termed the three "f's" – fun, food, and free. My theory is as long as we have two of these elements in any of our events, gatherings or worship experiences, they should hopefully be a big hit.

So as I mentioned, these are just some of the ideas in the pipeline. But a congregation cannot exist without partnership, without you, for this is your congregation here at Har Sinai.

This is our challenge to you. Do something with your congregation at least once or twice a month. And by the way, it doesn't have to be worship services, though you are always welcome to attend. Some possibilities can include hosting a monthly Torah study downtown or

in your office. I'll be happy to facilitate, just let me know where and when. Take an adult education course or attend a lecture series. For knowledge about our tradition, even if it is simply for the sake of personal edification can be surprisingly uplifting. Get involved with social action. They have a number of great projects ongoing and coming up that could always use an extra hand. Bring your kids or grandkids to tot Shabbat services because it is amazing to see what happens when the youngest members of our community sing out loud and with pride. You can also sponsor a dinner or an oneg.

One great way to get involved is to try bring-a-friend to shul day, which by the way is, everyday. Whether these friends are currently unaffiliated or left the congregation days or years ago, we should acknowledge how walking into this place can be intimidating. Thus the quickest way to help newcomers and old timers alike to feel at home, is for them to know someone even before they walk into our doors.

Opportunities abound, it is up to you and to all of us to make the most of them. You have chosen Har Sinai to be your home; I encourage you to make the most of it.

At the same time, we are going to strive not to change the heart of who we are as a congregation and community. Har Sinai is a proud Reform congregation with a strong connection in particular to timely social issues. We are a both a new and old congregation with tremendous potential. And if we all get involved then next year we can look back and see just exactly what we can cross off Har Sinai's 'Bucket List' as well as what we should be adding to it in order for us to keep building for the future.

And in case you were wondering, next on Har Sinai's Bucket List: setting a Guinness World Record for eating our own weight in apples and honey. Make sure to join us right after services today. L'shana Tova