



Living Inspired

Rabbi Daniel Green, Rosh Hashana 5776

Play to Your Own Strengths

By 2009, the electronic giant Circuit City closed the last of its 567 stores. The retail behemoth was slain by Amazon. Circuit City just couldn't compete with the overpowering presence of its online and unconventional rival.

With Circuit City's obituary written, all eyes turned to its surviving main competitor, Best Buy. For four years, Best Buy spiraled downwards, losing more and more market share, closing more and more stores. In 2012, when CEO Brian Dunn resigned amid allegations of misconduct, the writing seemed to be on the wall. Things were bleak at Best Buy.

Then it all began to change. To the amazement of the analysts, the new CEO, Hubert Joly, turned it all around. With overhead down by more than a billion dollars, profits began to soar. Retail sales up 12%! Online sales up 17%! What possibly occurred?

Joly did something counterintuitive. He doubled down! Instead of reducing retail floor space he expanded it. Instead of cutting the number of retail employees he hired more. Instead of investing less in his salespeople he enhanced their training. The rationale? Hubert Joly realized that Best Buy could never beat Amazon at its own game. The only way they could win was by playing to their own strengths. Like the old adage - if you're invited to compete against Mike Tyson - play chess!

Best Buy couldn't compete with the convenience of online shopping or with the price points of a competitor with little overhead. What would separate them from Amazon was a great shopping experience, in an expansive modern showroom, with even more inventory. By creating the optimal retail setting, a customer, who came to just feel and touch the product, would be far more likely to close the deal in the store. By focusing on their strengths, rather than competing against the strengths of their competitors, Best Buy emerged from their near death experience.

Old School Charm

Liel Leibovitz, in a recent article in Tablet Magazine, applied the Best Buy business model to synagogues challenged with constituents that are less and less interested in conventional religion. His advice: don't focus on areas that you can't compete. Forget about the yoga class in the musty shul basement. Don't invest in musicians to enhance your services when there's better concerts down the block. Throw out the feel-good, generic, talk about *Tikkun Olam*.

Focus on your strength and your values. And what are they? “Old school Judaism.” Deep and meaningful religious experiences.

Now I believe in “old school Judaism”, but I got to tell you something, there’s a fundamental difference between the lure of an iPhone 6s to that of Neilah. Everyone can appreciate a 50” LED flat screen TV. It takes a little more of an acquired taste to savour “old school Musaf.” It’s a lot more challenging to excite people about things they need to work on to enjoy.

The utilitarian philosophers, Bentham & Mill differentiate between higher and lower pleasures. A flat screen television is a lower pleasure. Like eating an ice cream sundae, the amount of effort expended to access the gratification is minimal. Higher pleasure involves the intellect, or the soul, and requires determination and commitment. If you aren’t prepared to invest - the pleasure is unattainable. But while higher pleasures take effort, the enjoyment that accompanies them is in a league all to its own.

Stop Saying You're Fine

In her recent book, “Stop Saying You're Fine”, Mel Robbins argues that our propensity to say we’re “fine” is symptomatic of the malaise of our society. How are you? - Fine. How’s the family? – Fine. How’s the job? - Fine. “Being fine” is a cop out. We’re fine because we are complacent. We are fine because we stopped aspiring for something more in life. We are fine because we delude ourselves into feeling content with lower pleasures. We are fine because we have stopped making life changing decisions.

There is an epidemic in America where 1/3 of the country describes itself as “dissatisfied.” 1 out of 3 Americans ache for more. Yet, everything is still “fine.”

An interesting analysis by Behavioral Economist, Dan Ariely, was done regarding the rate of organ donations in various European countries. The organ donation rate of residents of Sweden was 86%. While in Denmark, the rate plummeted to a meager 4%.

I may be a provincial, but to me Denmark and Sweden don't seem all that different. How is it possible that there could be such a great cultural divide within Western European countries? The answer - it's all in what you ask. Or more specifically, it’s all in what the DMV asks.

In Denmark, drivers were asked to: “Check the box below if you would like to participate in the organ donor program.” Only 4% elected to do so.

In Sweden the form was identical except for one word: “Check the box if you do not want to participate in the organ donor program.” Guess what 86% of the people chose not to do? - Check the box.

In the end, Sweden and Denmark, share a strikingly similar value: they both don't like checking boxes. 86-94%! And it’s not just Denmark & Sweden, western society in general doesn’t like making decisions. Our typical reaction is inaction. And, this phenomenon doesn’t only apply to minor questions of a trivial nature. But the more difficult the question the more we run away. Organ donation is a tough existential dilemma with moral and theological overtones. It’s precisely in those areas that we are less like to make tough calls.

Wake Up!

The Arizal comments that on Rosh Hashana we're not judged for what we have done but what we aspire to do. Are we content with our position in life? Is everything just "fine" or do we ache for something more. There is a custom not to sleep on Rosh Hashana afternoon. Why? After sitting through long services and sermons we earned it! It's Yom Tov? Because we don't want to send a message that we're stuck in our lethargy. We want to show that we are vibrant and alive and poised for something greater. That's we believe dreams are possible.

It's no coincidence that on Rosh Hashana we read about a couple that wanted to have a child for so long but were never blessed with one. Finally at age 90 and 100, the angel tells them that they will. How do they react? They laugh but they believe. They're ready! It's never too late.

The Unlikely Heroes

Samuel Pierpont Langley was poised for greatness. With prestigious positions at both Harvard and the Smithsonian, he was sought out by the War Department and was heavily funded to invent the world's first piloted aircraft. With his vast experience and connections, Langley proceeded to hire the top minds in the field, began experimentations, and reveled in the spotlight. He became an instant celebrity, was featured repeatedly in the New York Times, as the entire country followed his historic efforts.

A few hundred miles away, two brothers with little formal education had a similar dream. Yet, no one noticed. They funded their efforts from the modest profits they earned at their bicycle store. On December 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright made aviation history by flying an aircraft 120 feet in 12 seconds. No one was there to see it except a handful of their friends. Shortly after hearing the news of the Wright brothers' success, Langley quit.

How was it possible that Langley failed while the Wright brothers succeeded? He had the best minds in the world and deep pockets?

In the end, Langley's team was hired for a job. The Wright brothers were motivated by a dream. They were fueled not by a grant but by a vision to change the world. They had the passion that money can't buy.

Do You Have a Plan?

Rosh Hashana is the day that we are supposed to formulate and crystallize our growth plan. A sustainable plan predicated upon the guiding principles that we are passionate about. This morning, I would like to unveil, the Adas growth plan for 5776.

Unlike past years, I will not focus on the "what" but on the "why". I will not be "selling" you any specific project or programme. Today I will be talking about vision, passion, and how to systemically foster a community of growth.

The Adas growth plan is dubbed “Power 36.” There is a Talmudic concept that the world is sustained in the merit of 36 exceptional people. Borrowing from this idea, we are cultivating a core group of 36 individuals who commit to the following vision:

Living Inspired & Strengthening Community.

- Living Inspired is not being content with a life that’s just “fine.”
- Living inspired is the desire to find a passion that money can’t buy.
- Living inspired is the courage to make a decision.
- Living inspired is about seeking higher pleasure.
- Living inspired is the belief that our tradition has the fundamental rubrics for meaningful living.

Passion is contagious. Power 36 members are not “Adas attendees” but inspired rainmakers forming the Adas core. To be part of Power 36, you need to possess the followings shared passions:

- A commitment to Living Inspired
- A belief that the rubrics for meaningful living are found in our Torah
- A commitment to Strengthen Community
- A commitment to being a presence at our community hub – this shul

Power 36 is a transformative concept for our community to unleash the power of the collective. If you are disinterested in Living an Inspired life - Power 36 is not for you.

If this excites you... come & see me! We will break all the glass ceilings for communal growth together.

Don’t Miss Your Chance

Rabbi Marc Levene, of Hampstead Garden in England, shared this story. On a radio show in Israel, an elderly man named Mel called in. Mel was a survivor. As a young boy, he and his best friend Wolf were sent tearfully by their parents in Germany on the Kindertransport for England to escape the impending doom. As they waved goodbye, they did not know when, or if, they would ever see their parents again.

After reaching the shores of England, Mel and Wolf were placed in an orphanage together. They tried their best to adapt but life was so strange and difficult. They spoke German and sounded like the enemy. The fate of their families plagued them with fear and anxiety.

One day, all the children were told to wear their finest clothes and make sure to look as presentable as possible. A special event was planned. They soon found themselves at a local parade on High Street to honour King George VI and Queen Mary.

Each boy from the orphanage was given a Union Flag to wave as the Royal couple passed by. The excitement was palpable. Finally, the King and Queen came into view and every one began waving their flags furiously.

In all the commotion, Wolf bolted into the street and darted for the Royal carriage. Dodging the royal guards, he jumped onto the running board on the side of the carriage, poked his head inside the carriage and managed to blurt out something to the King and Queen before being hauled off by the guards.

Realizing he was no threat, the soldiers returned him to the embarrassed headmaster of the orphanage.

Wolf feared the worst kind of punishment. Now he waited for the consequences. After a few weeks, Wolf was abruptly called into the headmasters' office. Standing intimidated in front of this commanding figure, he was told that as a result of his behavior he was being expelled. The eight year old's eyes began to swell. He had no idea where he would go or what he would do. No family, no friends in a foreign country preparing for war with his.

Before being dismissing, the headmaster looked at the crushed boy and said I just have one question for you: what did you say to the King and Queen. In a quivering voice, Wolf said: "I asked them to help find my parents." The headmaster paused and without saying a word opened the door. Standing in the doorway were Wolf's parents. The King had interceded. The eight year old tried to cry out in joy but his voice was speechless. He simply leapt into his parents' warm embrace.

There was a long silence on the radio, as Mel finished the story. Finally, the now elderly man broke down in heart-rending tears. "Why didn't I run to the King as well. I had my chance as well but I didn't take it. I never saw my parents again."

Today we have a chance. On Rosh Hashana we are given a chance. Life is so much more than just "fine." Seize the moment, check the box, and be inspired. Together we can achieve the impossible. Let's talk.