THE FORTUNE IN YOUR POCKET
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ
TEMPLE SHOLOM - VANCOUVER BC, CANADA
OCTOBER 15, 2022

I was cleaning out my wallet the other day, something I apparently only do about once a decade and behind an old US medical insurance card, yes we've lived in Canada, with MSP for 9 years so that gives you a sense of the last time I cleaned my wallet. Behind this old, long expired card I found a slip of paper from a fortune cookie that I too had long forgotten about.

Written on the tiny slip of paper was the fortune, "You are extremely generous and always thinking of others".

I was trying to remember why I saved this particular fortune? Was it because I thought such a statement from a sugary cookie was insightfully true about my character or was it because I wanted that cookie and its fortune to remind me of what I aspire to be but am not yet? Is it true or false?

It was said of Reb Simcha Bunem, a 18th century Hasidic rebbe, that he carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. One was inscribed with the saying from the Talmud: Bishvili nivra ha-olam, "for my sake the world was created." On the other he wrote a phrase from our father Avraham in the Torah: V'anokhi afar v'efer," "I am but dust and ashes." He would take out and read each slip of paper as necessary for the moment.

R' Simcha teaches us that life is a balancing act between the self-perception of being merely one of the uncountable specks of dust in the Universe and the self-perception that each of us is unique and irreplaceable. We live in the spectrum between these two perspectives. The challenge is to be aware of both while not letting one become dominant.

Chloe Zelkha, who leads Avodat Lev (service of the heart), a virtual space of prayer, poetry, and groundedness, was similarly challenged by Rabbi Bunim, and his two pockets. She asked her community as I am asking you to consider this morning, "If you were carrying two slips of paper in your pocket, two opposite truths that tell the story of conflicting truths about yourself right now, what might they say?"

When Chloe asked, the responses she heard were varied and moving. They reflect how many of us are feeling.

- "To be alive at this time is terrifying // to be alive at this time is inspiring."
- "This too shall pass // this will have lasting impacts."
- "We are safe // we are vulnerable."
- "It is okay to be happy // it is okay to be sad."
- "I am strong // I need help."
- "It is time for vigilance // it is time for ease."

- “It is too much to hold // my heart has infinite capacity.”

Chloe’s question is the perfect prompt for this moment, both because of as much as the pandemic is behind us, it's also still very much with us, its impacts clearly affecting the future of our economy, mental health, public services, politics, conflicts, education, the list goes on and because this weekend with the holiday of Simchat Torah marks the end of an intense period of Jewish holidays, the annual reading of the torah and the beginning of another cycle.

If you were to try to graph this out on a piece of paper with “it's all about me” on one end of the page and “it's not about me” on the other end of the page we might be compelled to use a vertical slash (/) to indicate either/or, one or the other. As I considered looking at that fortune in my wallet. In fact that is how Chloe wrote it when she published the story of this exercise with her community. But what Reb Bunem is teaching, what I am trying to learn is that it's not a vertical slash meaning either/or, rather it's a horizontal line, a dash meaning both-and. Life is lived in finding a balance between them.

Finding a middle path, living in moderation, is central to our Jewish faith. It is from this place where we can best cultivate our spiritual, physical and emotional health. Judaism recognizes this balance in the form of the *yetzer ha’ra* and the *yetzer hatov*– the bad and the good inclinations. The rabbis believe that both are necessary in order to live a healthy life. The Talmud observes that we are each both good and capable of evil, and yet were it not for the evil inclination, “no one would build a house, take a spouse, and beget children.” (Bereishit Rabbah 9:7) In other words, we must learn the art of balance.

There is no more appropriate time to focus on balance than during this period of chaggim, of holidays that began with Rosh Hashanah, the New Year with all its hope and possibility and conclude Monday with Simchat Torah the ending of the annual reading of Torah, the conclusion of the life of Moses and the journey of the Jewish people back from slavery to return to the borders of their ancestral home land. This is the reality in which we always live; endings and beginnings, dichotomies that are connected. It is the yiddish euphemism about how when one door closes, a window opens. We are living in the middle of that house with its doors and windows slamming shut and blowing open, the best we can do, the thing we most need to do is find comfort in that place, to find balance.

Even the symbol of Tishrei, the Jewish month which has just begun relates to the theme. The zodiac sign of Libra is the same as that of Tishrei. Libra in Hebrew is Mozna’aim, which means scale. In ancient times, the scale was used by putting the objects to be weighed on one side and stones in units of measurement on the other. So the idea of the scale is to take two opposite and different things and measure the difference between them.

Bishvili nivra ha-olam, “for my sake the world was created.” and V’anokhi afar v’efer,” “I am but dust and ashes.” are two ends of a continuum between them is a line, a horizontal dash, and I am the pivot point upon which that line, with its scales on either end rests. I have to find the balance between them.

It's not “either/or”, life, relationships, feelings, emotions, opinions, all that we have in front of us in this New Year, all of those heavy weights that seem to be pulling us in opposite directions are not either/or, they are or at least according to our rabbis “both-and”. We live in the space between the pockets and their certainty, in the precarious and active space of trying to always find balance.

So I took that scrap of paper, that fortune out of my wallet with its declarative statement, “You are extremely generous and always thinking of others”. I turned it over and wrote one word on the back, I wrote, “sometimes” and I put it back in my wallet and will try to remember to look at it, and more importantly learn from it more than once every 10 years when I clean out my wallet.

BTW there on the back of the fortune I also found seven lottery numbers, I’ll find out in tonight’s lottery draw if that fortune really is a fortune after all. And to be true to the words it proclaims about me, I promise to share.