Paradise Lost

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I have a brief announcement – something has been lost and we need everyone's help in finding it and restoring it to its rightful owners. It is extremely valuable; priceless really. People tell me that without it, they would not have become who they are today. It was last seen about 10, maybe 15 years ago. When I last saw it, it was literally all over the place, it was in schools, it was in homes, it was in parks and on baseball and soccer fields. It came out particularly in the afternoon, around the time school let out and you could often find it working a part-time job or just hanging out at the mall. Some mornings if you were up early you could find it delivered with your newspaper. It very complex and multi-faceted – this thing that we have lost – in fact that is part of what made it so incredibly valuable, it could be so many different things all at once.

Everyone if you would please look under your seats and next to you for just a moment – we seem to have lost – **childhood** – and I am hoping that the key to bringing it back might be somewhere in this room!

Let me give you an example of what I mean, it's a true story. I am friends with a elementary school principal, she told me that just a few weeks ago she was giving a tour of her school to perspective Kindergarten parents, at the end of the tour a group of parents approached her and asked her if she could provide a list of what colleges - graduates of the elementary school were accepted into. Having run this particular elementary school for the last 10 years – she handed them the neatly typed list and made a mental note to make more copies – this was not the first time she had heard the request.

There is a new religion in middle class America today. Not Kabbalah, or The Secret, which by the way are both extremely old ideas just *'google'* Isaac Luria and Norman Vincent Peal – both have been around a long time. The newest religious dogma in middle class America today is "Success-ism".

"Success-ism" is the fundamental belief that the key to a life of happiness and prosperity is a 4.0 grade point average, a college resume built from grade school and stratospheric SAT scores. US News and World Reports annual list of top colleges and universities is its' bible, test prep courses are its religious school where valuable 'values' such as how to write a winning essay, or how to take a standardized test are learned. The mitzvah of Tikkun Olam now has an added component – will it look good on my middle school, high school or college application?

In this new religion – the clergy are guidance counselors, teachers and school administrators. Whatever measures or practices they ordain we obey with a religious fervency unmatched in our spiritual lives. Indeed we have become fundamentalists in our pursuit, it is not enough just to do what is asked, our children must do even more, must surpass expectations; more homework, more extra-curricular work, more activities to

impress college referees, more of everything, so they can make it, so they can get in; in this new religion of "Success-ism" God is not spelled G-O-D but rather G-P-A.

Achieve, perform, succeed are not Jewish values! My child is a *mensch* has nothing to do with his GPA! A person's worth cannot be measured by test scores or the diploma that hangs on the wall, nor the balance in their checkbook. Jewish values are honesty, integrity, reverence, respect for family and tradition. We value education - not as a means to an end, it is an end in itself. We study *L'shma* for the sake of Heaven, not for the reward; but for how it impacts our soul and relationship with the Divine, the world around us. We study not to master over things but to understand them.

In Judaism we pursue wisdom not success, because wisdom is a holy pursuit – it is *kadosh* - because the purpose of wisdom is the repair of the world. The acquisition of wisdom is to cultivate the heart, elevate the spirit, broaden the mind - not to make it but to make something of ourselves.

But, you say – Rabbi, the world has changed – we live in the real world. This is all just part of modern family life, we live in a global economy our children have to work harder in every endeavor to constantly sharpen there competitive edge – if they are not prepared for the world ahead of them they will not succeed and if they don't succeed they will not be happy. And we like all parents want them to be happy.

Twenty-five years after David Elkind wrote his landmark book, *The Hurried Child,* and chronicled the damaging and crippling effects of hurrying our children through life – our children are still running, and we are running with them. From the youngest of grades our children's school days start earlier and earlier, a full hour or two before most adults begin our work days, and they often end late at night, after soccer practice, dance rehearsals, student council meetings, religious school, test prep courses and hours of home work. There weekends are not any less busy, with traveling sports teams, plays and performances, B'nai Mitzvah's to attend – if they can't make the service then at least the party, Sunday school, community service and then still more hours of homework in preparation for Monday and the week ahead.

I'm tired just from listing it for you – and you're the ones that are living it. And if you're a grandparent I know you are not excluded from this craziness, you're the designated schlepers and picker-uppers. You too look at the hurried pace of your grandchildren's lives – how there schedules and demands appear so adult like – so much like your own and ask, what is going on here? Where did childhood go? Why's everybody running?

It is the greatest challenge and dilemma of parenting in our society today – there is just so much that we want for our children! And in truth because of our relative wealth and security – there is little we can't give them. We don't want our children to be unhappy in school, but we also don't want our children to miss out on future opportunities. We don't want to put too much pressure on them to succeed, but we don't want to be too lax with our expectation of them either. And so how do we choose? How

do we create a balanced childhood for our children that will enable them to be happy kids, give them the opportunity to be successful adults and at the same time carve out a balanced life for our family?

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev once observed a man hurrying along the street, look neither right nor left:

> "Why are you rushing so? He asked him.
> "I am after my livelihood," the man replied.
> "And how do you know," continued the rabbi, "that your livelihood is running on before you, so that you have to rush after it? Perhaps it is behind you, and all you need do to encounter it is to stand still."

Sometimes the answer to life's problems is just to stop – or at the very least, to slow down and let life catch up with you. In the words of the great Rabbis Simon and Garfunkel: ♪ "Slow down you move too fast, you've got to make the morning last, just kicking down the cobble stone, looking for fun and feeling groovy, (motion to congregation to join in) badadadadada feelin' groovy."

Our tradition's ancient answer to these new problems of our modern middle class world is of course Shabbat

Three weeks before his death Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was interviewed for what would be the final time. When asked by the interviewer what message he had for young people Rabbi Heschel replied: "Let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments.... And above all, let them remember ... to build a life as if it were a work of art."

Living life like it is a work of art is essentially a way of looking at our lives and our children's lives in perspective. If we can overcome some of the stress of our adult lives and disconnect our happiness from our children' success we can once again appreciate the value of childhood with its own special joys, sorrows, worries and rewards. Valuing childhood does not mean seeing it as a happy innocent period but, rather, as an important period of life to which children are entitled. It is a child's right to be a child, to enjoy the pleasures and suffer the pains of childhood that are infringed upon by hurrying. For our children and our grandchildren childhood is the destination, the gift we give them by being their parents and grandparents. Let's lock the gates on the Garden of Eden for a few more years – they have a lifetime to be grownups – indeed they will be grownups the rest of their lives, but childhood is for only an instant - lets not make it any shorter than it already is, for there sake, for our sake and for the sake of the world.