“Success-ism”
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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. In the evening is was often around our kitchen table. It’s 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 of these 4 year olds approached her and asked her if she could provide a list of the colleges into which graduates of the elementary school were accepted. 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 Report's annual list of top colleges and universities is its bible, and 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.

Now this is going to come as a shock, but "achieve," "perform," and "succeed" are not Jewish values! My child is a *mensch* has nothing to do with his GPA! Our religion does not measure a person's worth by their test scores, by the diploma that hangs on their wall, or by the balance in their checkbook. Jewish values are honesty, integrity, reverence, and respect for family and tradition. We value education deeply, but **not** as a means to an end; an education is an end in itself – indeed learning has now end – we are students all of our lives, life and how we live it is the only test that matters.

In our tradition we are commanded to make our study *L'shma* for the sake of Heaven, not for reward, but for how it impacts our soul, our relationship with the Divine, and the world around us. We study not to master over things but to understand them to draw closer to them.

We pursue wisdom, not success, because wisdom is holy and eternal and success is fleeting and success is not a goal – it may be an outcome but we strive for wisdom, we pray each day in the Amidah, "Hanaynu may-etchah day-ah, beenah v'haskayl – grant us of God with knowledge, understanding and insight. The acquisition of wisdom is to cultivate the heart, elevate the spirit, broaden the mind - not to "make it" but to 'get it' something of ourselves. To understand ourselves, the world around us and our role in its ongoing repair.

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 adult's workdays begin, and they often end late at night, after soccer practice, dance rehearsals, student council meetings, religious school, test prep courses, and hours of homework. Their 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, aunt, uncle, cousin, friend I know you too are not excluded from this craziness, no one is, you're the designated *schleppers*, picker-uppers and homework helpers. You see Second Graders with hours of homework each night. We've all had family gatherings cut short so that our 11 year old niece or nephew can return home early Sunday evening to

finish multi-page multimedia research projects and reports for 5th grade. **All of us look at the hurried pace of our children's lives – how their schedules and demands appear so adult like – so much like our own and we ask, what is going on here? Where did childhood go? <u>Why's everybody running?</u>**

This 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. We want them to have time to relax and unwind, but we don't want them camped out in front of the TV or video games all day like bumps on a log. 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? How do we reclaim childhood and family life?

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.
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> "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, put the demands of the world on hold, or at least pause. As the Rabbi taught – often we simply need to slow down and let life catch up with us. In the words of two other great Jewish teachers 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) badadadadadada feelin' groovy."

That's what God did, for 6 days God worked and labored and created and on the Seventh day God rested, God ceased from all creative work he had chosen to do and in that very act of stopping God made that day holy. *V'yikadaseh oto*. God stopped and so can we.

How do we find balance between the many competing demands of parenthood and childhood – the answer might be around your dinner table. I know what you are thinking – the rabbi is going to suggest that we have Shabbat dinner together – we've heard that sermon before. I am going to suggest that, but not just Shabbat dinner, every dinner! Our tradition teaches that each home should be a Mikdash M'at a sanctuary in miniature, it is supposed to be a place of holiness and serenity – it may feel like a bus station sometimes, people coming and going all on different schedules but for 1 hour every evening, and I mean every evening it can be a sanctuary, an island of holiness a shelter against the

storm, a stronghold of faith and love and support and understanding.

Every night – with the same religious ferver that we re-arrange our lives to get our kids to soccer practice or school on time – re-arrange your life and there's to get everyone around the dinner table and have a conversation. Talk about the day, talk about tomorrow, catch up with each other and let life catch up with you. I know it's not easy – I just added one more thing to your already busy lives and schedules. But it is our responsibility as parents to see that our family is a family in the truest and holiest sense of the word, that there is balance amidst all of the imbalance of our modern lives and demands and those of our children.

I know we're not very comfortable with capital-C-"commandments" in Reform Judaism. We often prefer these matters as being "strongly suggested" instead of "commanded," and if you need to hear this sermon that way, then fine, if every night seems like climbing Mount Everest, then simply double the

nights during the week you already have dinner together, maybe you will go from none to some.

However be aware that in the religion of Success-ism if a teacher or tutor said your child had to study something every night – you would find the time. If we can find the time for that, we can find the time for this, ask yourself what is ultimately more beneficial?

A little mandatory 'togetherness' can go a very long way, and a number of recent studies back this up. Families who share meals together on a regular basis, and make an effort to communicate while there're at it have children who perform better in school, exhibit more self-esteem and feel as if they are in more control of their lives.[1]

The family dinner is not a panacea, but it is a start and an important first step in reclaiming childhood and family life. The next step you take from there is up to you, but I am nearly certain

[1] Boteach, Rabbi Shmueli *Ten Conversations You Need to Have with Your Children* p. 139

you will find it around your table in the words and ideas you share with each other.

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 the real work of childhood; teaching our children to view life that way - that is the job of parents. If we can overcome some of the stresses of own adult lives and disconnect our own happiness from the perception that we, and by extension our children, need to be busy all the time, then we can once again appreciate the value of childhood with its own special joys and sorrows, worries and rewards.

Valuing childhood does not mean seeing it as an innocent, happy 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 as the children they are, and not as the over-programmed "junior adults" they can become when they hurry through their youth in a head-down rush to adulthood**.** For our children and our grandchildren, childhood is the destination, the gift we give them by being their parents and grandparents. Let's slow it down – they have a lifetime to be grownups – indeed they will be grownups the rest of their lives, but childhood is for only an instant. We can make the most out of it by giving it more time, not less.