



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BEREISHIT > Noah

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 9, 2010

Noah

Two Sermons

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Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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Bereishit > Noah > 21st Century Flood

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ABSTRACT

The story of the Great Flood in this week's Torah reading is relevant today more than ever. Look around. People everywhere feel submerged in a flood of anxiety and the deluge shows no sign of abating.

We are anxious about our finances, our safety, our future, our country, our families, our children. And though we live in the Information Age, the latest technology only floods us with choices, but provides few solutions.

How can we prevent these raging waters from overwhelming us? How can we find shelter from the storm? How can we build an ark of refuge for the 21st century flood?

At this uncertain and stressful time, we read the Torah story of Noah's ark with its many provocative questions and equally provocative answers for today. Among them:

- Why did God choose water – the symbol of life, cleansing, blessings and knowledge – as the means of destruction? Why not fire?
- What is so harmful about knowledge without integration?
- What secret did Maimonides know that Rousseau and Russell could not grasp?
- The rain did not need to turn into a flood; it could have been a rain that waters the fields. But no one listened. Are we listening today?
- How can we find an ark of refuge from the modern-day flood of anxiety?
- Once fortified by Torah's guidance, how can we build a better world?

TO BUILD AN ARK OF REFUGE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY FLOOD

1. Noah, the Greatest Financier

Q: Who was the greatest financier in the Bible?

A: Noah – he was floating his stock while everyone else was in liquidation.

How can we be like Noah?

That is our subject today – how can we build an ark of refuge amid a flood of financial anxiety that we are experiencing today?

And we are anxious not just about our finances. We are anxious about so many other things – our safety, our future, our country, our families, our children.

But, at this uncertain and stressful time, we read the Torah story of Noah's ark with its many lessons for today.

For example: When you're stressed, float a while.

All kidding aside, let us examine the story of Noah and mine it for the counsel it offers us.

2. Why By Water? Why Not By Fire?

As the story begins we learn that the world has become utterly corrupt, and God – saddened by the degradation of the human race – has decided to destroy it. Only Noah and his family are to be saved from the great flood that will obliterate all. To that end, Noah is told to build an ark of refuge for himself, his family and selected creatures.

The first question that occurs to us is: Why by water – why not by fire? Why did God choose water – the symbol of life, cleansing, blessings and knowledge – as the means of destruction? Fire – which later consumed

the twin sin-cities of Sodom and Gomorrah – would seem so much more appropriate.

But the flood was not so much a punishment as it was a *consequence*. In the Torah, reward and punishment are really cause and effect, like bruising yourself when you fall. The flood was a natural and inevitable result of many years of corruption. When people are corrupt and self-indulgent, they inevitably end up destroying themselves.

This is because when you harm another person you are also harming yourself, since you and the person you harmed are part of one universe under one God.

The person who loves God also loves whom God loves, and God loves His children. The flood was the inescapable result of people hating and killing each other.

Water was the way the world was purified from its own *self*-destruction. Like a *mikveh*, the ritual pool which contains 40 measures of water, the flood raged for 40 days and renewed the earth.

If the people hated and harmed each other out of ignorance of their common bond, then water is a metaphor for the opposite of *ignorance* – for *knowledge*. Not just plain knowledge but divine knowledge. As Isaiah prophesied, “They will not hurt or destroy... for the world will be filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the seabed.”¹

Only when water or knowledge is divine does it prevent hurt and destruction. When it is just ordinary water or knowledge, it can become a flood or a curse lacking focus and integration.

¹ Isaiah 11:9. Contrast the language with the Genesis 6:13 description of the world’s corruption prior to the flood: “The world filled with crime.”

3. Knowledge Without Integration

What is so harmful about knowledge without integration?

It leads to a fragmented and compartmentalized world:

- We see our behavior as separate from our own thoughts and principles, and we act without integrity.
- We see ourselves as separated from one another, and we hurt others, even those we claim to love.
- And, worst of all, we see ourselves as separate from God, and we think nobody is watching what we do.

How bad does this human compartmentalization get? The eminent historian, Paul Johnson, in his work *The Intellectuals*, documented the contrast between the professed ideals and actions of key humanist thinkers of the Enlightenment – a period known also as the Age of Reason. Take, for example, Jean Jacques Rousseau, the author of *The Social Contract*. His lofty ideals did not stop him from impregnating his young laundress five times. And then forcing her, on each occasion, to drop the newborns – his children! – on the doorstep of a Paris orphanage (Hopital des Enfants Trouves). This orphanage he himself had written about, noting that two thirds of the babies die there within the first year, most others by age seven, and the few that survive become homeless beggars.²

How could such a degree of disconnect exist?

Bertrand Russell gave this explanation: When asked how he, as a professor of ethics, could behave unethically, Russell said, “I am also a teacher of mathematics but I am not a triangle.”

Like Russell, academics often take pride in their detachment. They say: “I can be completely knowledgeable of a given topic, and it does not affect my behavior.”

² *The Intellectuals* by Paul Johnson, pp. 21-22.

Now, contrast this attitude with the words of Maimonides – the 12th century Jewish philosopher, doctor to the royal family of Egypt, who wrote primarily (surprise, surprise) in Arabic. Maimonides writes³ that a true scholar is recognized by how he walks his talk – “through his actions: in his eating, drinking, intimate relations... in his speech, manner of walking and dress, in the management of his finances, and in his business dealings” – how he orders every aspect of his life in a seamless flow between his knowledge, his principles based on his knowledge, and his actions.

To have knowledge affect you this way requires a certain amount of abrogation of the ego – called *bittul* in Hebrew – or put another way, it requires a total immersion in the pure waters of knowledge. True knowledge is not about the self or the ego, it is about the divine truth that informs knowledge. And this requires a humble recognition that we are a transparent channel for this knowledge – like fish submerged in water who are always connected and aware that their entire sustenance comes from the water.

4. Tree of Knowledge

When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge – that is, of the knowledge of good and evil – they began to sense themselves as separate entities from God and their divine mission. They unleashed knowledge upon the world that is divorced from its higher purpose.

Ten generations later in the time of Noah this dichotomy evolved into total corruption, with one person turning on another.

The waters of the flood came to remind the world and purify it with a total immersion. This was reminiscent of the world as it was at the beginning of creation, completely submerged in water, the source of life. This was a foretaste of the world that will one day be “filled with divine knowledge as the waters cover the seabed” – a knowledge that transforms the person into a divine vehicle, preventing hurt and destruction.

³ Mishne Torah, Laws of De’ot (Personal Development), Chapter 5:1

And mind you, the flood began as regular rainfall, as a warning and reminder to the people to wake up and correct their ways. First came a taste of what's ahead – an attempt to remind everyone that it was time to act. But when no one paid attention, the rain came. And it became a flood.

The rain did not need to turn into a flood; it could have been a rain that waters the fields.

But no one listened. Are we listening today?

Perhaps we are, but if so, we are listening to the wrong message or the wrong messengers.

5. A Flood of Information

They tell us that we are living in revolutionary times – the so-called Information Age. They tell us that we have never been so powerful, never so free, that we now have the unprecedented ability to access any information anytime, anywhere. But are we feeling freer today? With all the information at our fingertips, are we happier people, more fulfilled, less fearful, making better decisions? Has the Information Revolution informed us or inundated us?

Indeed, the argument can be made that our unprecedented access to information and slew of options has also brought on unparalleled misery. We are drowning in a flood of information – addicted as we are to the constant flow of television or internet news. We spend hours upon hours watching all manner of experts and pundits, or reading internet bloggers who spew forth their opinions (informed or not). This, in itself, is more destructive to our individual and collective nervous systems than we can imagine.

A nation obsessed with watching movies and one that had no better metaphor for the World Trade Center attack than “it looked just like a movie,” has fallen victim to watching our lives played out on the screen...

This flood of information, with its assault on our psyche, is in many ways worse than any physical flood. When you go to sleep after watching the news – bringing you horrors from the world over – how can you sleep peacefully? And when after a fitful sleep, how else can you begin the next morning but full of anxiety? And then, of course, you fall out of bed and start the cycle all over again.

The morning news is where they begin with “Good morning,” and then proceed to tell you why it isn't.

Yet, within the curse lies the cure.

This flood of information alerts us to the dangers of knowledge without focus, to the dangers of information without integration. And it reminds us that we must embrace divine knowledge – knowledge that uplifts and empowers us to be proactive and take control of circumstances. Divine knowledge is not just information that turns us into robotic observers and victims, that demoralizes us and paralyzes us with fear and anxiety.

6. Refuge from the Flood

What can we do to find refuge from the modern-day flood of anxiety?

Like Noah, we must build an ark.

Q: In a stormy sea, who can you trust more – an amateur or a professional?

A: Remember that the Titanic was built by professionals, the ark by an amateur.

Noting that in Hebrew the word for ark – *teivah* – also means “word,” the 18th century founder of the Hassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov advised:

Build yourself an ark of refuge from the words of Torah. They will protect you from the raging floodwaters – be their personal or financial anx-

ieties, fears for the stability of your home and family, or well-founded concerns for the safety of your community or nation.

At first glance, this advice may seem counter-intuitive. For example, if you are suffering financially, it may be more practical to intensify your efforts to find supplemental income – a new job or new types of investments. When money is lost it seems that the most logical thing to do is to become more aggressive in your pursuit of money, not to escape behind spiritual walls.

7. True Security

But think again. From where do we derive ultimate security? Can a structure rest comfortably on a shifting foundation? Who can feel safe being embraced by a transient lover? Can a child build confidence with absentee parents? Can anyone ever be made to feel secure by something that is fundamentally insecure?

True security can only come from something that is not temporary. Safety and trust can only be built on that which is solid and permanent.

But everything in this material universe is intrinsically impermanent. We are mortals living in an ever-changing and ever-aging world. Everything physical erodes and eventually dies. Everything that has a beginning has an end. Our looks, our youth, our food, our belongings, and yes – our money – all get depleted.

I always found it ironic that those financial vehicles – which are inherently temporal and fraught with risk (as very prospectus legally reminds us) – are called “securities.”

With all material things being so transitory, how can we expect to find security in them? Yet we turn to them again and again. Is it because we have become addicted, or because we don’t know of any other alternatives?

The mere fact that in times of financial anxiety most of us would gravitate back to more aggressive money pursuits is the clearest demonstration how addicted we have become to money, and how we feel that it is the only panacea to relieve our anxiety.

However, the rule is that anything that brings you anxiety can never relieve your anxiety. But this is a rule of logic, not of emotions. As much as it may make sense that a “drug” will not solve your problems, the addict returns to the drug again and again. Why? Because our lives are not generally ruled by common sense. Most of our decisions are emotional ones in the first place.

As one drunk said to another: “You drink to drown your problems. Then you find out that problems float...”

8. Simple but Brilliant Advice

And thus comes the simple but brilliant advice of this week’s Torah reading: “Build yourself an ark ... come into the ark together with your family.”

When the floodwaters of financial pressures and other anxieties are raging and threaten to drown you, build a protective “ark” and enter into it with your family. Surround yourself with sacred words, insulate yourself with spiritual values and ideas.

Take time each day, each week, on weekends – designate any time that works – gather your family together, study some Torah, read a spiritual thought together.

This is not escapism. This is being pragmatic and empowering. It is acknowledging that when the storm is raging, when the rain waters are lashing against your windows, and when the winds threaten to rip your house from its foundations, you have the power to create an ark of refuge – a protective womb – that lifts you and your loved ones to an eternal place, which shelters you from the storm.

I am not speaking about just any shelter that avoids danger, but a space that brings permanent comfort. For it connects you to what is immortal. So that even when you “leave the ark” and return to the material world you are somewhat immunized, no longer so vulnerable to the inherent insecurities of everything material.

Build yourself an ark. Enter into it. Feel nurtured.

A simple piece of advice. But one that can change your life forever.

9. Build a Better World

Once we are fortified by Torah’s guidance, we can then confidently build a better world. For a defensive response is not sufficient. Yes, we need to protect ourselves from the flood, but our ultimate goal must be to transform the world into a place where we need not fear a destructive flood.

Just as Noah was commanded after the flood⁴ to leave the ark and build a new world,⁵ so, too, must we.

And here comes another lesson from the story of Noah.

After seeing the earth self-destructing due to human corruption, Noah was terrified of setting foot on dry land and beginning anew. He actually had to be commanded by God to start afresh (“to leave the ark”⁴) and to build a new home to raise his family (“be fruitful and multiply”⁶). Though Adam was previously given this command,⁷ it had to be repeated to Noah after the flood. Because after the human race had abused its contract with God and forfeited its right to exist, the contract had to be renewed.

⁴ Genesis 8:16.

⁵ See Midrash, Vayikra Rabbah 30:8: Noah saw a new world.

⁶ 9:1.

⁷ 1:28

10. The Raven and the Dove

This also explains the mysterious episode following the flood. Noah first sent out the raven to check out if the land had dried. He then sent a dove – once, twice, three times – until the dove no longer returned, indicating that it had found a dry resting place.⁸

What does that mean?

According to Kabbalah, the raven is a symbol of *gevurah* – severity, judgment and discipline. The dove represents *chesed* – love, sensitivity and compassion.

Noah first sent the raven because he felt that, after the people had abused God's gifts and corrupted the entire world, the only way to start fresh was with the program of law and order – severity and discipline. Since it was clear to him that “the inclination of man's heart is toward evil,”⁹ the predominant counter-force has to be aggressive administration of justice and strictly-enforced discipline.

But Noah was wrong. It was not the aggressive raven but the compassionate dove that discovered the dry land. It was the dove that first returned with an olive branch in its beak, and then became the first creature to return to dry land.

In so doing, the dove showed us that, even after the great crimes of the flood generation, there is hope for the human race. Even after destruction, we should not become bitter and hardened. Yes, we are humbled, but we still recognize that the primary driving force in life must be love and compassion. Discipline is necessary, but only as a sub-set of love.

⁸ Genesis 8:7-12.

⁹ Genesis 8:21.

11. Call to Action

So, the next time you face a dilemma, a challenge, the next time you encounter a disappointment – the next time you witness the pettiness, greed and corruption around you and wonder whether we can ever overcome this challenge – know that, like the dove, you will find a dry land to begin building a new, better world. And when you do – do it with love.

Using the guidance of the Torah – which teaches us how to love God and each other – let us leave our anxieties behind, roll up our sleeves and start the hard work of tackling the challenges of today. Let us begin by turning the flood of anxiety into a flood of torrential goodness and kindness. And let us create a world flooded with divine knowledge “as the waters cover the seabed.” Nothing less than a spiritual deluge will do.

That is our life’s mission. Let’s start today.



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Bereishit > Noah > Mission Statement

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ABSTRACT

"Why am I here?" is perhaps the most important question in life. No business can function without a mission statement. Can you and I?

This week's Torah reading tells the story of Noah and the flood. What personal relevance can we find in this ancient narrative, which seems so removed from life today?

Like Noah, who was commanded to leave the ark and rebuild the world, so must we. And like Noah, who rode through the waters of the flood to rediscover his life's mission, so must we.

But if we don't know why we are here, how can we accomplish our mission? If we don't have a mission statement, how can we know where we are headed?

Our lives begin and our beings are shaped in the nine months we spend in the waters of the womb. But then comes the time of birth – we must leave the comfort and protection of our ark in the water-world and enter dry land. On land we may feel disconnected from our source, but that precisely is the challenge – to create awareness in a dry and detached world. To distinguish between the means and the ends and, as form follows function, to direct all our efforts toward our higher goals.

Hence the need to know our mission in life and to know how we are going to fulfill it. Using the business model, this sermon will provide specific, concrete guidelines toward developing a focused personal mission statement for getting (and staying) on track.

DO YOU HAVE A PERSONAL MISSION STATEMENT?

1. Going in the Right Direction?

An old man was driving down the freeway, when his cell phone rang. Answering, he heard his wife's voice urgently warning him, "Herman, I just heard on the news that there's a car going the wrong way on Route 290. Please be extra careful!"

"You bet," said Herman, "But it's not just one car. It's hundreds of them..."

[Pause. Let them get it. For those who didn't, you can add:] "In fact, I am the only one going in the right direction!"

As we leave the rich holiday season and re-enter our daily routines, now is the time to chart a course for the New Year – to make sure we are headed in the right direction.

The holidays we just finished celebrating were a spiritual oasis. They nourished our psyches and empowered us with the ability to move forward with new passion and commitment. But now that we have left their embrace and are re-entering a hostile world, we are charged with the mission to illuminate and warm our corner of the universe. Just how are we going to do this?

2. Leaving the Ark

This week's Torah reading provides us with the answer. Like Noah, who was commanded¹ to leave the ark and rebuild the world, so must we. And like Noah, who rode through the waters of the flood to rediscover his life mission, so must we.

Our lives begin and our beings are shaped in the nine months we spend

¹ Genesis 8:16. 9:1

in the waters of the womb. But then comes the time of birth – we must leave the comfort and protection of our ark in the water-world and enter dry land. On land we may feel disconnected from our source, but that precisely is the challenge – to create awareness in a dry and detached world.

Life consists of two components: Means and ends. We can also call them tools and goals, or form and function. Or ... body and soul. Form must follow function; the means must be directed toward the end; the tools must be used to achieve the goal. And the body must follow the soul. Not the other way around.

But if we don't know where our soul wants to go, how then can we use our tools effectively. That would be like wielding a hammer to pound in a nail without any sense of what we are building. Yet, too many of us are spending most of our time and energy on the means, without really knowing the ultimate goals of all our efforts.

3. One Man's Course Adjustment

A friend recently shared with me the following personal story. "My business had run so successfully for the last ten years, I thought I was headed for an early retirement. But the last six months have completely shattered that hope. My business went down big time. I went from being CEO of a busy company to searching for part-time work in the classifieds. Almost overnight my fortunes made a 180 degree turn, and I can no longer enjoy the luxurious lifestyle I once had. I no longer own a holiday home, I sold my sailboat, and am even struggling to hold on to the family home.

"But with all this going on, something weird has happened. Everyone around me expected me to fall apart. I had been a workaholic, my business was my life, and seeing that go down should have meant that I go down with it. But I didn't. In fact, just the opposite. With less work on my plate, I now have more time to spend with my family. And guess what? I enjoy it. I have

gotten to know my 8 year old daughter better than ever, because I have the time to listen to her. I used to be at the office until 10 or 11 pm, but now I am home to put the kids to bed, read them a story and give them a goodnight kiss. I used to eat Chinese take-out at my computer every night, but now I sit and eat with my family, hearing about their day and sharing mine with them. I have even started taking walks with my wife like we did when we were newlyweds.

"I have come to realize what is really important and where my time and energy should really be spent. Thank God I went broke. Otherwise I'd be so rich, and yet so poor. I might have had everything, but I would have had nothing..."

4. Mission of Our Lives

This brings us to defining the mission of our lives. To find true happiness, we must know our mission. This, in turn, directs all our means, tools, forms and resources, toward our goal and function.

Like the center point in a circle, our life's mission is our hub, and the infinite possibilities of life are the spokes that radiate out of that hub. The center's focal point allows us to make sense of all the details. It also defines our destination, providing focus to our life's journey. A life without a mission is a circle without a center, lacking focus and coherence. Without a defined center, we may be blessed with many resources, but not have no real focused direction.

I, therefore, would like to take this opportunity, as we leave the ark and re-enter a broken world, to speak about the need for each of us to discover – or rediscover and renew – our mission in life, and compose a personal mission statement.

How true and tragic it is that in business we fully understand the need for a mission statement, but in our personal lives most of us do not feel the need to define our end goals. As everyone knows, a business will fail if its mission is not clearly defined. And even when it is, many a

business struggles to maintain its course and ensure that all its employees have their eyes on the same point on the horizon.

So, how can we expect to succeed in our personal lives without a clear, concise and defined mission statement? And how can we write a mission statement, if we have only a vague idea of what our mission is?

5. Business Model

The business model is actually a great one to follow when writing a mission statement. Because the first thing that a business mission statement must have is ... (drum roll) ... clarity. It cannot be vague.

So when formulating a personal mission statement, it's not enough to say "I want to be happy," or "I want to make a lot of money," or "I want to live a fulfilling life," or "I want to make a difference."

Every business wants to make a lot of money, or to offer an indispensable product to its customers. But that's not what any business writes down in its mission statement because that kind of statement would be simply too generic. It would not specify how the company plans to arrive there.

So if you want to be happy or make a lot of money, you must crystallize in your mind *what* exactly will make you happy or *how* you will spend the money you make.

The accumulation of material possessions is a great distraction. It can deceive us into thinking that it in itself is the end goal. But for all its power, it is merely means not an end. Yet the means are so seductive, that they can lull us into thinking that there is no other goal in life.

Nothing is farther from the truth, and nothing can be more destructive.

The first and foremost thing each of us must know is that we have a higher mission in life. We were sent to earth for a purpose – each one of us – and if not for that purpose we would not be here. Period.

When Austrian Emperor Joseph II heard his first Mozart symphony, this “connoisseur” reportedly said to the great composer: “Beautiful, Mozart, absolutely beautiful. But one thing: Far too many notes...”

Mozart replied: “Perhaps your majesty. But not one more than necessary...” “Cut a few out, and it will be perfect,” insisted the emperor. To which Mozart responded: “Which notes did you have in mind?!”

Every human being is an indispensable musical note in the grand cosmic symphony. Each one of us is meticulously chosen and placed in our necessary place and time – not one more or less than necessary.

Why most of us forget this is because survival in this world can distract us to the point that we may end up being too busy to pursue our true calling and fulfill our true purpose. So we need constant reminders to keep us awake and aware of our true purpose.

6. Why Are We Here?

According to the Torah, life’s general purpose – the generic mission of all human beings, if you will – is to make the world a better place. To utilize all our resources and opportunities to refine our environment and transform it into a channel for the divine. But each one of us must do it in our own unique way. How?

The mystics explain it this way:

Each of us is allocated an exclusive number of spiritual opportunities – or “divine sparks” – that lie embedded in all our life events and experiences. Our job is to recognize these opportunities and unlock their potential.

For instance, when we travel to a particular location, we may be going for personal or business reasons. However the true reason

for our journey is to encounter places, people, experiences and/or events that carry spiritual opportunities. Our mission is to uncover and develop these opportunities.

If we are open to new experiences and encounters, we find that each contains unique spiritual opportunities – [those “sparks”] – which we are meant to find and actualize.

Therein lies the key to our particular mission in life. We must look closely at our life experiences to discover patterns, and these patterns will guide us to uncover the mission we are charged with.

It would have been nice if God sent us to earth with a little book of “crib notes” stating our mission. The fact that we don’t have that luxury tells us that part of the mission is to discover the mission on our own.

Yet we are given many signs and directions so we can do so without much difficulty. By studying our own lives, especially the “givens” – the forces that we do not control – we can easily recognize our calling.

In fact, these four aspects of our lives hold the clues: 1) our personality, 2) the opportunities we are afforded, 3) the people we love and encounter in our everyday lives, and 4) the places we live in, work in, or travel in.

All of these are determined by Divine Providence. They are not accidents. They therefore contain a myriad of invaluable information regarding our mission in life. If we examine them one by one, we will find a wealth of invaluable information.

7. Personality

Consider your personality. You have a unique personality, with specific desires and interests. You might be artistic, scientific, analytic or emotional – and there many more adjectives to define your unique nature and that of everyone you know. Some people are aloof and cool, others

are eager and warm. Some are more intuitive, others more rational. Some are more organized, other more spontaneous. There are introverts and extroverts. The list goes on.

Each of these features is shaped by your particular mission on this earth. Even your desires and your looks – and certainly, every part of your personality, temperament and disposition – contain, beneath the surface, untapped energy waiting to be released.

And self-awareness is the first step to recognizing your mission.

If you are an artist, for example, you might discover that you are to use your skill to open up others to new ways of looking at life and God. If you are a sensitive soul, you might find that you should utilize your empathy to give people hope.

Your unique character – your qualities and virtues, and for that matter, your weaknesses and vices that you discipline and channel – are all signposts telling you about your mission. And that your mission is to utilize your distinctive nature to refine yourself and the world.

A friend says that every one of her strengths is also a weakness. And so she must constantly work to refine them. She is very well organized, but if she does not work on balancing her sense of “everything has its place” she can become regimented and controlling. She is very kind, but if she does not work on putting boundaries on her kindness, she could give away the next month’s rent. She has a good sense of humor, but she has to make sure she is sensitive to her audience and doesn’t crack jokes in the face of someone else’s distress.

This is how we all master and refine our traits, and in so doing develop new ones, all the while refining our world and making it a better place.

8. Opportunities

Next consider all the opportunities that constantly come your way. Family, friends and acquaintances provide various connections. One thing leads to another and worlds open up.

Your education is another source of unique opportunity, as are the resources you have earned or inherited. Different offers will come your way throughout your life. Your family's business, a friend's introduction, even a seemingly "random" encounter may bring you new opportunities.

Your work is another major spiritual opportunity. It can reveal much about the underlying spiritual bond we all share. For example, if you are a physician, you can recognize the "Divine Image" in your patients (as the Book of Job says, "from my flesh I behold God"²). A scientist can do the same by reflecting on the parallels between science and spirit.

And then there are the countless opportunities to do good and help our fellow human beings in need.

Seventy-year-old Clara lacked nothing, and one day she noticed that someone else was lacking. She could have let the opportunity pass her by, but she identified it as her own, and that decision changed the next 30 years of her life. What happened was that Clara, like she did many times before, walked into a butcher shop and noticed the butcher setting aside the scraps – the skins and bones – in a big bag on the counter. At first she thought he was saving it for people's dogs, but when she asked, she was shocked to learn he was saving it for people's children. "This week give them each a whole chicken," she said, "I will pay for it." Before she died, a few days shy of her 100th birthday, Clara Hammer was raising money and feeding real chicken to 900 poor children every week. And she was famously known as "the Chicken Lady of Jerusalem."

² Job 19:26.

Every opportunity is waiting to be actualized by us. These opportunities are meant to not merely be exploited for personal gain, but primarily to be used for spiritual gain – to fulfill your mission.

9. People

The people you have met and will meet in your life – family, friends, co-workers, even the so-called “random” encounters with strangers – all carry hidden opportunities, that can further direct you in discovering your mission.

All the people you encounter have their strengths and weaknesses. The fact that they are part of your life means that your mission includes dealing with them, even if the relationship may be a challenging one. In addition, you learn lessons from them, which teach you about your mission.

Rabbi Mendel Futerfas, who spent many years in a Siberian gulag, tells how he learned a great lesson from a tightrope walker who was also imprisoned there.

The rabbi asked the tightrope walker about the secret of his art. “What does one need to master? Balance? Stamina? Concentration?”

The tightrope walker’s answer surprised him: “The secret is always keeping your destination in focus. You have to keep your eyes on the other end of the rope. But do you know what the hardest part is?”

“When you get to the middle?” the rabbi ventured. “No,” said the tightrope walker. “It’s when you make the turn. Because for a fraction of a second, you lose sight of your destination. When you don’t have sight of your destination that is when you are most likely to fall.”

10. Places

The places where you have lived and traveled add another dimension to your spiritual opportunities. Each place has its own character and offers unique possibilities.

The Book of Proverbs advises, “God leads the footsteps of man.”³ The reason you find yourself in these places is because you need them to fulfill your mission.

When Ruth, an international trainer in negotiation tactics, travelled to Nigeria she had no idea what the week would bring. Her assignment was to help the Chevron employees negotiate with natives who were holding the oil field hostage. At first she saw it as an uncomfortable and potentially dangerous assignment. To be gotten over quickly. To get the hell out of there on the earliest plane. But she decided to take this opportunity to learn about a culture foreign to her. She found herself being inspired by the eager, God-loving natives who embraced her with surprising warmth. She spoke to them from her Jewish tradition and found that this approach – much more than her business acumen – bridged the cultural chasm.

But you need not travel far to find spiritual opportunities.

Bart, an elderly Holocaust survivor, found them every Saturday on his way home from the synagogue. His route home took him past the parking lot of a large hotel, and there he would frequently encounter fellow Jews whom he would invite home for a Shabbat meal. A friend witnessed Bart in action one day:

Seeing two young women getting out of the car, Bart gave a friendly wave which they returned.

- “Hello there,” he said, “enjoying the day?”

- “Yes, yes we are,” the young women replied.

³ Proverbs 16:9.

- “Are you here for business or pleasure?” Bart pressed on.
- “Business as a matter of fact,” was the answer.
- “And what line of work are you in?”
- “We are both representatives for a clothing manufacturer.”
- “Ah the *shmattah* business. You must be Jewish?”
- “As a matter of fact ...”
- “Well, in that case you must join me for Shabbat lunch. Please, my wife will be so disappointed if I don’t bring some guests home. She’s been cooking for two days!”

In this way, Bart introduced countless strangers to the beauty of Shabbat, and when he passed away 15 years ago, his synagogue decided to inaugurate a “Bart Stern Open Shabbat” in his honor to invite all comers.

[Bart had collected many sparks in his lifetime, and even having left this world, he continues to collect them.]

11. Conclusion: POPP

These four aspects of your life – your personality, opportunities, people and places (POPP for short) – embody the mission and destiny of your life. The reason you have your unique personality, and the reason you encounter these particular opportunities, people and places, is because their cumulative energy is essentially your mission.

When you apply yourself and examine these four aspects which shape your life, your mission will not take long to emerge. And as you develop a relationship with your POPP, it will catapult you toward fulfilling your higher calling.

It may take some work to review your POPP. It’s always a good idea to consult with an objective friend or mentor who can help you look at these four areas, and see how they define your mission. The more you invest in this discovery, the clearer will be your results.

Remember: Form follows function. Once you come to recognize your calling, all your tools and resources will take on a new and focused direction.

This lesson is also critical for our families. Let us not forget to teach our children what we learn – that every encounter in their lives is a spiritual opportunity. Let us show them how each moment can be transformed into a meaningful experience – a virtuous moment, a compassionate one, a giving one. There may be no greater gift that we can give our children than imbuing in them the constant awareness that every step they take is an opportunity to create beauty.

In conclusion, as we all leave the “ark” to fulfill our mission of rebuilding the world, may we be blessed to discover and embrace our mission and implement it in our every day routines. And may we work together to make the world a better place. It sure needs us. And that’s why we are here. May we all rise to the challenge. Amen.