

The Blue Zones:  
creating a life of meaning and purpose.

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Let me start with a question: Which parent has not heard that great protest uttered from the mouth of a child: “It’s not fair.” How many of you have responded with that most truthful and entirely unhelpful answer, “Sometimes, life’s not fair.” I’m sure many of you have uttered just such words of protest yourself.

The powerful poem we read this morning, *Unataneh tokef*, beginning on page 176 of our prayer book, makes just this declaration: sometimes, life isn’t fair, sometimes the circumstances of our life are beyond our control. But that is not where the poem begins. We are first reminded that *there is* a great deal in life that we *can* control. At the bottom of the page we read: “You open the book of our days, and what is written there proclaims itself, *for it bears the signature of every human being*. Much of the fortune or failure we face, much of what is written in our book of life is inscribed there by our own hand. Then comes the tough part, on pages 177 and 178 we are confronted with judgment’s severe decree: life *is* unfair. So many matters of life and death of sickness and health, so many of the variables that define our journey *are* beyond our control. While we can do nothing about the randomness that sometimes blesses and sometimes curses our existence, the poem ends with a message of hope. We can temper even the most severe of decrees by the way we carry ourselves. “Repentance, prayer and charity,” *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*, “temper judgment’s severe decree.” In circling back to its beginning we are reminded in the poem’s last lines that what *we* write in our book of life can take some of the sting out of even the harshest of realities.

What I discovered this summer is that this is not just a matter of faith ... it is a matter of science. I learned this in a fascinating little scientific study titled: *The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer from the People Who’ve Lived the Longest*. Author Dan Buettner, has been involved in the study of those regions of the world where, per capita, more people live to one hundred than anywhere else on earth: the Mediterranean Island of Sardinia, Italy, Okinawa, Japan, the Nicoya Peninsula, in Costa Rica and, believe it or not, Loma Linda, California. What secrets of longevity did he find in these communities? What did his research find as tempering judgment’s most severe decree? Not surprisingly diet and exercise play significant roles. But those findings would not be reason enough to share this book with you this morning.

It is the third ingredient in the longevity recipe that I want to focus on: *living a meaningful life*. It has been written, that a long life may be good enough but a good life is long enough. That may be true enough. But, what we all would really love is both a good *and* a long life. Well, Buettner’s study affirms that living a good life aids significantly in the living of a long life as well. This is not to pass judgment in any way on the far too many good people who have left us much, much too early. It is only to say, that the

chances of living a long life are significantly *better* if that life is a good life as well. The next version of our High Holy Day prayer book might word it this way: “*Teshuvah, tefillah* and *tzedakah* have the *statistical probability* of tempering judgments severe decree.”

So, how might we create our own Northridge Blue Zone? Well, actually, we already have. In fact, I can say with some certainty that belonging to TAS has the statistical probability of adding years to your life, at least as much probability as your weekly workouts. Buettner identifies three common elements across these four communities that contribute to the building of a meaningful life. What I was surprised to discover is that these three elements are very closely related to our prayer book’s notion of *teshuvah, tefillah* and *tzedakah*. I will label them as purpose, pausing and belonging.

As Jews our ultimate individual and communal *purpose* is *Tzedakah*, the pursuit and implementation of justice for all. I will have much more to say about this on Yom Kippur. For now, I want to simply declare that we are doubling our efforts to support the hungry and homeless in our community. As we have done for many years now, we will hand you a paper bag as you leave the sanctuary this morning, asking you, to fill it up with non-perishable items for SOVA and to bring it with you on Yom Kippur. That food is needed now more than ever. In recent months SOVA has seen the line outside its doors grow from its monthly average of 3000 individuals and families to over 8000.

You will receive another bag as well – a reusable canvas bag expressing the fact that we are “Fed up with Hunger.” With this bag we join in participation with the Jewish Federation in efforts to battle the scourge of hunger in our city which does not go away when the food collected on Yom Kippur is used up. It is our hope that you will keep this bag with your other reusable grocery bags and that each time you go to the market you will take this bag with you, placing in it a few items designated for the SOVA bin located in our lobby.

I also want to call your attention to our “community action tree” and “repair the world map” located outside the sanctuary. Our hope is that every one of you between today and Simchat Torah will place a leaf on our tree, noting your commitment to our community and color in our world map with a statement of your commitment to world healing. By Simchat Torah we want our tree and map to be spectacular visual displays of how we as an Ahavat Shalom community we are making a difference in the world.

And when we make a difference for our community and our world, we do something healthy for ourselves as well. An 11 year study by the National Institute of Health found that “individuals who expressed a clear goal in life – something to get up for in the morning, something that made a difference – lived longer and were [mentally] sharper than those who did not.” (p.246) As a member of this community, you have the opportunity to hitch your sense of purpose to a much larger and broader communal network with comparable goals. Here you have the opportunity to be “the change you want to see in the world.” And now you know that *tzedakah* truly does temper judgments severe decree by promoting your own health as well.

Now, it is most important to have a purpose, but, it is quite another to go blazing, full speed ahead, 24/7 without pausing to smell the flowers along the way. A meaningful life is fostered not only by the pursuit of purpose, but by the ability to slow down and enjoy the journey. Studies suggest that taking time to rest and reflect may help keep at bay the harmful side effects of stress caused, in part, by the pace of our lives. Stress is a contributing factor to chronic inflammation which is seen as a leading cause in the onset of age related diseases such as Alzheimer's, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and the like.

Let's see ... taking time to pause and reflect. "... *t'fillah*, prayer ... tempers judgment's severe decree." Those of you sitting here today who are NOT stressing because you are worried about what is going on in your business are doing something very, healthy for yourself. What else is a rabbi to say? But, here's the research: "A recent study in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior followed 3,617 people for 7.5 years and found that those who attended religious services at least once a month reduced their risk of death by about a third." (p.251-52) Similarly an Adventist Health Study funded by the National Institute of Health followed 34,000 people over 12 years and found that those who regularly attended worship services were 20% less likely to die at any age." Simply put, "people who pay attention to their spiritual side have lower rates of cardiovascular disease, depression, stress ... and their immune systems seem to work better."

We have been working hard to create healthy, stress relieving opportunities for reflection and renewal. Things like our Yom Kippur afternoon meditation room, our warm and uplifting alternative "guitar minyan" services offered both on the High Holy Days and monthly on Shabbat mornings, our beautiful new prayer book *Mishkan Tefillah*, the occasional inclusion of our Shabbat house band, the engaging presence of Rick and Addie Lupert, are just a few examples of the healthy prayer opportunities we have created in recent years.

"Healthy centenarians everywhere have faith," writes Buettner. "The simple act of worship is one of those subtly powerful habits that seem to improve your chances of having more good years." (p.251) So I expect to see more of you here on a more regular basis. It's just plain good for you.

Finally, context is everything! In the pursuit of purpose and even in the experience of prayer it is belonging -- human connection -- that gives added meaning to our days. Buettner discovered that the centenarians in his study were all firmly grounded in the dense social networking of faith communities. We all belong to many, many communities, but most are relatively small and narrowly focused. School, work, various social and business groups have no staying power. Once they have served their purpose they tend to fade away leaving us with, at most, one or two lasting relationships.

Not so faith communities. Take our own for instance. For forty-five years Ahavat Shalom has been here its own large, dense social network part of an even larger and denser social network over 3 millennia in the making: a network extending

geographically across our neighborhoods, our city, state, country and globe and across time as well, bridging us to generations past as well as to those yet born.

Let's be honest, large, dense social networks suffer from all the usual complications of human interaction. And so our prayer book wisely provides us with the tool of repentance, *teshuvah*, the third component tempering judgment's severe decree. Repentance is critical to the maintenance of a strong, healthy community where we want to belong. And is, therefore, a vital component in maintaining a blue zone here on Rinaldi Place.

Now, repentance does not adequately capture the full dimension of the word *teshuvah* which really means to turn or return or, in general, move in a new direction. That is something we have been doing a great deal of lately. In the past few years, our amazing Synaplex Shabbatot, our confirmation classes' trips to Washington D.C., a new program focusing on teen and adult resiliency and two unforgettable Israel adventures are just a few examples of the new directions we have been moving with the intent of building stronger communal connections.

But these are only the beginning. Our efforts at strengthening the community have born fruit in two efforts of historic proportion:

A little more than a year ago, at my urging, we began a long range planning process. The incredibly dedicated group who you have met this morning, led by our new congregational president, Lisa Kantor has spent many months thinking about how to broaden and deepen our connections. They began with focus group's in which many of you participated. Some of your suggestions have already been implemented and many more are currently being studied and considered. Additionally they have conducted extensive research investigating some of the best practices in the leading congregations across America. They have considered leading edge concepts in the not for profit world and heard from some truly visionary leaders both within and outside the Jewish community. The work of those involved in the long range plan has been incredibly exciting. I know, you will be inspired as well when their vision is revealed to the congregation later this year.

As this visionary work was progressing, it became apparent that for our vision to ever be more than a dream we needed to act to secure the future of our community. For decades we have labored under the weight of significant financial obligations that have among other things, limited our ability to sustain an appropriate level of staffing to offer the kind of programming and outreach that is commensurate with the kind of community we envision ourselves to be; and to repair an aging facility, in great need of upgrading in order to meet our needs as we move into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Henry David Thoreau once said, "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be for lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them."

With these words in mind, I challenged the leadership of our community to envision the future of a financially secure and stable Ahavat Shalom and to take the steps necessary to make that happen. To my surprise and delight ... they listened and took up that challenge.

I am so thrilled to announce this morning that, to date, 55 families have joined in 'embracing the possibilities.' It was so heartwarming to walk down the hallway this morning and see the newest addition to our lobby: a temporary wall of honor expressing profound appreciation to these families, who have collectively decided that now is the moment to lay a strong foundation upon which to build the future envisioned in our long range plan. In a short while, one of our campaign co-chairs will have some very exciting news to share with you.

Our tradition teaches *im ayn kemach, ayn Torah*. Without material sustenance, there can be no place for learning or enacting Torah. Without material sustenance there can be no place for community. This is a simple and inescapable reality. What we have achieved to date has been achieved with the support of a relatively small portion of our congregation. To achieve our ultimate dream we need the support the entire community. In coming days we will be reaching out to everyone. My simple request to you is that when you are called by your fellow Temple member please give them the courtesy of hearing what they have to say. They want to share with you in more detail our hopes and dreams for the future of our congregational blue zone. Then you will have the opportunity to make an informed decision. However you decide to participate will be deeply and truly appreciated.

During these challenging economic times we are so aware of the members of our congregational family who have lost their jobs, or even worse, lost their homes. We send our healing prayers to them. Their struggles make the generous support of those who have been spared such financial hardship, even more crucial, that we might continue the healing work of *tikkun olam* which is, first and foremost, the purpose of this community.

Today is Yom Harat Haolam, day of creation. This is a day on which we can determine in large measure what will be written in the book of life in the coming year. And of that which we can not determine we can at least temper judgment's severe decree by the world we determine to create together, for each other.

My friends, in a bit of self deprecating humor we have called ourselves, "the best kept secret in the San Fernando Valley." Well, for me this tag line stopped being humorous some time ago. *It is time to let the secret out.* It is time for us to rise up and be who we envision ourselves to be, for Ahavat Shalom to become a lead congregation in our Reform movement and in the North American Jewish community; a community known for its innovation, recognized for its creativity respected for its social justice advocacy admired for its spirit and passion and revered for the warmth and involvement it engenders. And in doing so, if we create such a community that, the next addition of "The Blue Zones" speaks of the longevity secrets of Sardinia, Okinawa, Costa Rica, Loma Linda AND Northridge, Ca what could be so bad?

May this coming year of 5770 be filled with the purpose, prayer and belonging that brings sweetness, blessing and a little added longevity to our journey together.

In This House  
by Beth Schafer

[http://www.bethschafer.com/fr\\_index.cfm](http://www.bethschafer.com/fr_index.cfm)

Chorus:

In this house, in this house  
It all comes together in this house  
In this house, in this house  
It all comes together in this house of God

In this house beats the heart of a family  
In this house is the center of a community  
We study and we pray, find meaning in each day  
In this house, in this house, in this house

In this house is a spark of God's creation  
In this house there is joy and celebration  
By song or by word, your prayers will be heard  
In this house, in this house, in this house  
(chorus)

In this house we can shelter, we can clothe and feed  
In this house there is always help for those in need  
A stranger makes a friend, becomes inspired again  
In this house, in this house, in this house  
(chorus)

A house of study (in this house),  
a house of prayer (in this house)  
A house of gathering (in this house),  
from everywhere (in this house)  
How lovely is your dwelling place, O Jacob  
(in this house)  
Blessing upon blessing fills these walls  
(in this house)  
(chorus)