

The Biltmore and the Treasure
 A Sermon for Rosh Hashanah Eve
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Shanah Tovah

This past August, I saw something breathtaking, from the deck behind my house, of all places. It was a gorgeous summer day so I decided to pray my weekday morning prayers outdoors. The air was crisp and the sun shone between the trees, dappling the dew sprinkled grass with shadow and sunlight. The scene was so beautiful; it took my breath away.

I couldn't help but compare the scene before me to the Biltmore Estate my husband David and I visited this summer. The mansion is huge, filled with priceless paintings, tapestries, and statues. The estate is rightly also famous for its expansive grounds, tastefully landscaped by Fredrick Olmsted, who is perhaps best known for designing New York's Central Park.

As I looked from my deck at the scene before me, I realized that it was just as beautiful as anything we saw at the Biltmore, if not more so. And it was here in my own backyard. Why did I so seldom make the time to pause to enjoy it, even if only for a few minutes before and after my daily prayers?

Isn't that so often the case? Something is right there before our eyes but we don't take the time to appreciate it?

As I stood on my deck, I was reminded of a story by the eighteenth century Hasidic master Rebbe Nachman.

A man once dreamed that there was a great treasure under a bridge in Vienna. He traveled to Vienna and stood near the bridge, trying to figure out what to do. He did not dare search for the treasure by day, because of the many people who were there.

An officer passed by and asked, "What are you doing, standing here?" The man decided that it would be best to tell the whole story and ask for help, hoping that [the officer] would share the treasure with him. So he told the officer the entire story of his dream and how he was looking for a treasure under the bridge.

The officer replied, "I also had a dream and I also saw a treasure. It was in a small run down house, under the cellar. The house was down a narrow dirt lane, under a large bent tree."

The man realized the house in the officer's dream sounded a lot like his own house. The man thanked the officer and rushed home. Once there, he dug deep under his cellar, and – sure enough – he found the treasure. He said, "Now I know that I had the treasure all along. But in order to find it, I had to travel to Vienna."¹

My friends, we, too, have had the treasure all along. We just don't realize it.

To find it, we may need to take an actual journey, as I did to the Biltmore Estates. But all too often that journey is something much more challenging: A journey begun in response to a frightening medical diagnosis that makes us appreciate the small details of each day, of what we can do in the face of what we can't.

A national or international tragedy that causes us to hold our loved ones a little closer.

A window into another's life that raises within us an appreciation for what we have or could have if we don't take it for granted.

It is a shame, really, that we waste so many days and weeks and years all too often oblivious, clueless, to the great treasures with which we are blessed.

One of the purposes of these High Holy Days is to make us stop and consider what are the real treasures in our lives: our relationships with our family; our faith, tradition, and our congregational community; our health, or whatever still works well enough to allow some quality of life; the relative safety in which we live; the beauty that surrounds us and can fill us with joy and wonder. These are treasures to enjoy, if only we give ourselves a few moments each day to really do so. These Holy Days call us back home to find the treasures buried within us, within our loved ones, within our community. Only by finding these treasures and embracing them can we be fully whole, fully who we can be.

So many of us are so stressed, so busy. We don't give ourselves a chance to breathe deeply, think deeply, see deeply in ways that could help us find balance in our lives and fill us with the kind of joy that is sustaining even or especially during difficult times. We rush to get to work, to get our errands done, to get the kids to school and to their many activities that keep *them* busy, care for our aging parents. We, and our kids, seek greater and greater thrills to just be able to feel something, anything, that can pierce through our overstimulated, overloaded, distracted lives.

What would it be like if we broke that treadmill? What if we made a change? That is how journeys help us discover treasures. They give us a break from routine so we can see things anew. That is what the Sabbath is supposed to be.

That is why one of the greatest treasures the Jewish people have had down through the centuries, one of the greatest treasures that have kept our spirits and our people alive through both good times and bad, is the Sabbath. It is unfortunate, though, that, like the man in the story, too many of us don't realize it is a treasure right in our own homes for the taking. The Sabbath is a treasure for many reasons, but perhaps the most important reason for us today is that it breaks the treadmill. Once a week the Sabbath gives us a vacation, a spiritual journey that is a break from routine, a chance to breathe deeply, think deeply, and see deeply the world and those around us.

This is what my son Yoni realized when he began working in New York for a multi-national law firm last year. He works 24/6. No matter what else is going on, Friday evening before sunset, he closes his computer and turns off his phone. Unlike many other law associates, he has the gift of at least some time to spend with Maddie and his friends. Time to celebrate, reflect, recharge. He appreciates the routine of keeping the Sabbath in a way he never did as a child. He now realizes that the Sabbath is an amazing treasure for which he, and Maddie, are extremely grateful.

There is another aspect to Rebbe Nachman's story.

So often we become so overwhelmed with the dramas of our lives that we stop seeing the treasures among and within us. That was the problem that faced the man in our story. He was so weighed down by his poverty that he couldn't see that the answers to his prayers were literally right under his nose.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his book, *Nine Essential Things I Learned About Life*, tells the story of a woman who has a similar problem, though the conditions of her life could not be more different. She comes to Rabbi Kushner so bored with her life that she sees no reason to continue to go on living. This surprised him. He was used to counseling people who confronted great challenges and tragedies. This woman was healthy, financially secure. She wasn't depressed. She was just bored now that her kids were out of the house. After much discussion, he advised her to find someone to help. He writes, "We feel better about ourselves, when we help someone else."

That is true. We yearn for meaning, purpose, happiness, comfort and connection. The most powerful way to find all this is by helping someone else, drawing on the treasures within us to uncover the treasures in someone else.

There is a wonderful gem of a quote, the kind that shows up as refrigerator magnet wisdom and is attributed to many secondary sources, but may originally have come from the 19th century historian Alica Morse Earle. She writes, "Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why it is called the present."

My friends, we can only fully experience the present by being fully present! We can only find the treasures that can so significantly enrich our lives by being present, to ourselves, to our loved ones, to our traditions, our community, to strangers who may need our help, to the glory of God's creation that surrounds us, to the still small voice deep within us.

One thing is certain. We have had the treasure all along.

Like the man in the story, we may have to dig deep to find it. We may have to travel first, to Vienna or the Biltmore, to realize we have it. But, no matter the conditions of our lives, it is there if we make the effort. All it takes is some time and gumption and the willingness to change. And that, after all, is the point of what we are undertaking during these High Holy Days.

May we all be willing to seek the treasures within and around us, and may God bless our efforts so that we make the most of these treasures in our lives, and let us say, Amen.

Shanah Tovah.

ⁱ, "The Treasure," *Rebbe Nachman's Parables*. <http://www.breslov.org/this-way-to-the-treasure/> (Accessed Sept. 5, 2016.) The Breslov version of the story appears in *Kokhvey Ohr* ("Maasiyos u-Meshalim," p. 26), as preserved by Reb Avraham b'Reb Nachman of Tulchin, as cited in <http://breslovcenter.blogspot.com/2013/08/the-bridge.html>.