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**Life Can Be Beautiful**

Rabbi Hayim of Zunz once told of a man who wandered, lost, through a massive forest. He had been wandering for many days and was hungry, thirsty, tired and frightened. As the last drops of hope were evaporating from his heart, he saw a woman in the distance. "I'm saved!" he thought. "Surely she knows the way out of here." He and the woman began running toward one another and as they drew closer, each could see the look of wishful expectation on the face of the other. Panting, they said simultaneously, "Thank God there's someone else in this forest. I thought I'd never find my way out." Quickly, the optimism drained from their faces, their shoulders fell slack and they uttered a moan of fear and sorrow as they realized they were both lost.

A moment passed before they could lift their heads once again, but they did lift their heads. They were lucky to find each other, even if they were still lost. She knew that her path led deeper into the forest. He knew that his path led deeper into the forest. They could forge a new path together that might lead them to safety, but even if not, they would at least not suffer alone. The two continued their search together, not necessarily saved, but filled with new hope.

It was two years ago today that I stood before all of you, just a week after September 11, and spoke of sustenance. We compared the experiences of Hagar and Ishmael, who had their world suddenly turned upside down, to our own experiences as Americans, for we, too, had had our world thrown into chaos. We acknowledged that, just as our ancient ancestors felt terrified and lost, we too felt this way, unsure that we could possibly survive our trauma. And then I promised, with every fiber of my faith, that, like Hagar and Ishmael, we would be sustained in this terrible time and that we would again thrive.

Today, I feel comfortable telling you that we have been sustained. We have helped each other through the most acute moments of our recovery from September 11, and we have in many ways allowed that terrible day to affect our lives very positively. We are nicer to one another, we value our lives and our loves more than we ever did. We even attend services more often. Based on all of that, the world should be a far better place to be right now.

Yet each morning, we shuffle out of bed and retrieve the newspaper only to be met by tales of woe. As individuals, we may have made the tragedy of September 11 into a cause for self-reflection and self-improvement. But the big picture of our world may actually look worse than it did two years ago. Israelis and Palestinians are killing each other in the name of freedom and Iraqis are

killing Iraqis and Americans in the name of self-determinism. Africa is a violent mess and, until very recently, has been left almost entirely to its own devices by the rest of the world. Countless volatile nations throughout the world seemed perched on the brink of terrible action, leaving the world with a feeling of constant insecurity. As for the United States, our economy is bad, jobs are scarce, and our President has very strong convictions that don't seem to lead to any solutions to our national or international problems. He has dragged our brave American soldiers and our scarce American money to the far reaches of the globe for his war against terror, yet many of us still can't wrap our minds around fighting a war against an idea, let alone fighting such a war with guns. The enemies of our nation are many and they're vengeful, and we are forced, through news accounts and color-coded alerts and security checks, to live in fear.

We could go on, but I suspect the point has been made, and continuing would probably make all of us cry. If reciting our sins erases them from our record, wouldn't it be wonderful if reciting the world's sins could leave the world with a clean slate as well? Unfortunately, our liturgy does not provide a penitential prayer long enough or broad enough to cover the state of our world. We have no prayer to purge the woes of our world, but maybe a closer look will reveal hidden beauties. Let me tell you about a modern artist named Chuck Close. I first encountered his work while visiting the National Gallery of Art in Washington with my mother. I spotted his painting from afar, a roughly 8 by 10 foot portrait of an unhappy, pensive looking middle-aged man. He has an unattractive nose and a slightly sick expression- no classic beauty. It's a big picture, and it's rather ugly. I turned to express these thoughts to my mom, she urged me to look more closely at the painting.

As I drew nearer to this big, ugly picture, smaller pictures began to appear. It turned out that this large portrait was made up of many 5 by 7 inch rectangles. A few of the rectangles just contained abstract images, swirls or circles of color. A few others had ugly images, revolting smears in morbid shades. But the majority of the rectangles had intricate and stunning visions within them. I was moved to see that something so superficially ugly could in fact contain many exquisite images and only a few unsightly ones.

As if this eye-opener wasn't enough, my mom then told me that, fifteen years ago, Chuck Close was stricken with a spinal column blood clot that left him a quadriplegic. Within a year of becoming paralyzed, Close was creating tiny paintings by holding a brush between his teeth and moving his head. A few years later, he regained some minimal motion in one arm, so his physical therapist fashioned an arm brace that allows him to hold a paintbrush. Now, Chuck Close, a man who will never have any substantial movement again, continues creating his large and intricate masterpieces, one small and stunning rectangle at a time. When I heard this, I stepped back again with newly opened eyes, and I saw a gorgeous painting and an extraordinary story.

This painting inspires a new perspective on our world. The portrait Close painted, just like our world, looks rather ugly when taken as a whole. Yet a closer look at Close's portrait revealed an extraordinary variety of images, most of them pleasant if not lovely. So too, a closer look at our world might also reveal something far more appealing than that which we see on the surface.

Try looking closer for a moment. Close your eyes and open your minds. What do you see? See the corps of people working for peace in nations throughout the world. See humanitarian groups sending people and food to countries where life is severe and resources scarce? See doctors and scientists finding treatments and cures for diseases that killed us not too long ago? See the ever-increasing number of religious organizations opening their doors to members of the GLBT community? Now open your eyes and see this very room, filled with people who have put their faith in God and in this community, and who add so much to each other's lives, to our lives. Like the small images in Chuck Close's painting, these are the beautiful building blocks of our world. They may not all be works of art, but, from the humanitarian groups to the individual BCC members, they are certainly pleasing to the eye and to the soul. As God said on this day five thousand seven hundred sixty four years ago, "This is very good." Not only is this good, but this is beautiful. Our lives are not lived only by the horrors we see in the news but by the joys we encounter in our homes and our offices and on the streets, and our lives have enormous beauty.

Now I must admit that, had my mom not been with me at the museum that day, I may not have developed such insight into Close's portrait. I would have remained at a loss and wandered toward the next piece on display. But, because she challenged me to look closer, I found new meaning. I actually found my way to a place of new understanding. Sometimes we all need help gaining a new perspective. Each of us has that power, the power to help others see beauty where none seems to exist, and help each other we must. Perhaps we are like the man and the woman we spoke of earlier, both of whom were lost and afraid, but like their forest, our world will be less frightening if we approach it together. And, even if we are lost, even if our world is dark and grim, we can at least share the hope that, like the wandering man and woman, we will find our way to a better place.

It is vital to understand that, like Close's superficially unattractive painting, the ugly big picture of our world is filled with many smaller pictures, many of which are quite beautiful. Knowing that there is beauty in the world helps us survive the day-to-day, but it can also allow us to become complacent about the sorrows that do exist. As much as we seek beauty in the present reality, we must also hope and pray and dream that the world will actually get better. We must dare to hope that someday the fighting that plagues the Middle East, especially Israel, our beloved homeland, will cease. We must pray that the long-suffering nations of our world find a respite from their pain. And we must dream of a time when we will again live in a country where our right to life, liberty and the pursuit of

happiness is not put on the line by the misdeeds of our own or the wrath of our enemies.

It seems impossible - world peace, freedom from famine and disease, a sense of national security returned... And maybe it is impossible, but we must hope for it anyway. Hope is hard to find in times like these, but it is our responsibility, as people whose anthem is HaTikvah, The Hope, to find it.

A Jewish search for hope brings us to our holy scriptures, where our ancestors lives provide countless lessons for our own. When we read the torah and haftarah portions today, we will encounter two women who understand what it is to hope. The torah tells of Sarah, the haftarah of Hannah. Abraham loves his wife Sarah and Elkanah adores Hannah. But both women are barren, and their husbands have other wives with whom they do have children. Those children prove to be a constant source of pain for the barren women, a reminder that God has closed their wombs.

Conceiving a child seemed absolutely impossible for Sarah- she was ninety years old. So, when she heard the angels tell Abraham that she would give birth, she laughed it off, tzachka. How could she entertain such foolishness? Yet she did bear a child, and he was a dream come true. She named him Yitzchak after her doubtful laughter, and she cherished him for the rest of her life.

Hannah was less pessimistic than Sarah. She went to the temple of God and poured her heart out, praying with every ounce of her strength that God would hear her and give her a son. She returned home and was intimate with her husband, a very necessary act for a woman hoping to conceive. Indeed she did conceive, and she named her son Shmuel because God heard her. Sarah is a model of more cautious hope. The chances of having her dream fulfilled were really slim, and she dared not want it too much. That's how we probably feel about the prospect of a truly better world. Peace and safety just seem so untenable... But let's hope anyway, because Sarah's story teaches us that the impossible can happen. God makes miracles, so let's ask for a miracle. Let's be like Hannah, and pour our hearts out to God so that God will hear us, and then let's go out and do what we can to ensure that our dreams become realities.

My friends, it is a difficult journey we have ahead of us. We will leave this safe place and return to a world that appears to be full of ugliness, and we will be barraged by depressing news and hideous images. But we can see more than just the world's woes. We can open our eyes to the countless beauties that fill our world, beauties that far outnumber and overpower even the saddest situations. And when we cannot by ourselves perceive these beauties, we can help each other see them, and together we will be uplifted. And this upliftedness will give us new hope and the hope will give us strength and we will use our strength to act, and our actions will improve our world, and the big picture will become beautiful, not just because we open our eyes to the smaller beauties of the world, but because much of the world's ugliness will be erased.

Hayom harat olam, this is the birthday of the world. Let it also be the birthday of our new perspective, of our new realization of the beauties of our world, and let it be the start of a good and sweet year filled with shared vision and hope. Shanah tovah tikateivu.