

Toy Story Sermon – First Day of Rosh HaShanah 5780

L'shanah Tovah!

To infinity and beyond! Does anyone recognize that slogan? Right, it is from the Toy Story movies. It is the catch phrase of the character Buzz Lightyear.

I have been thinking about the meaning of life many weekday mornings. I have not meant to be thinking such deep thoughts though. It is just that my daughter likes the Toy Story movies. She really likes them. And like a typical three-year old, she is willing to watch the same movie over and over again. So, I would not say that I have seen the Toy Story movies. I would say that I have studied the Toy Story movies. We have the first three on DVD. The fourth movie, released this summer, was the first and only movie that Chloe has seen in a movie theater. I feel grateful that a new one came out this summer since it allowed my wife and me to find the various promotional products distributed to stores, such as Toy Story diapers, Toy Story Band-Aids, and Toy Story children's books. However, as a rabbi (not only a parent) I have come to see these movies as delivering messages that all of us, including the adults, need to hear.

They do this in a brilliant, compelling way that touches on topics that most popular culture would be unwilling to seriously explore. At their heart, they examine our awareness of mortality and the need to bring meaning to our lives in the time granted to us.

Hear me out. If you are not familiar with the movies, let me tell you that they are about a group of toys originally owned by a child named Andy and the adventures the toys experience. The toys only come alive when all real people have left the room. They have different personalities: worried, snarky, angry, but they make up a tight community. They are led by a cowboy doll named Woody and a spaceman action figure named Buzz Lightyear. The first movie is all about Buzz's introduction into the community and Woody's first jealous reaction to him. Through their experiences, Woody and Buzz become good friends, stressing the importance of friendship and getting along with people who are different from you.

However, the first movie is not the one that I want to focus on. A new element is added starting in the second movie and stretched through the remaining two. This theme is the question of what is going to happen to the toys when the child that owns them grows up. What happens when their beloved child no longer wants to play with them and they have fulfilled their purpose? You see, the toys love to be played with. We are told that it is the time that they feel the most alive. They treasure the moments they receive love from a child. But what will happen when this ends? Will they be thrown out? Placed in the attic? Will another child give them purpose by playing with them? Essentially, the toys struggle with their mortality. They do not know how things will turn out for them when the time comes that they are no longer needed. The toys are aware that there is only a limited time that they serve a purpose. What happens next?

The second movie plays this theme out through a story in which Woody is stolen by a toy store owner who wants to sell Woody along with the rest of the dolls in his line of toys to a Japanese museum. The question of mortality arises as Woody struggles with the choice to be displayed in the museum, to be adored for ages or to return to his child knowing that one day the child will become an adult. He chooses to spend what might be a limited time being loved by his child. The third movie deals with the toys' mortality even more directly as it describes what happens when their owner Andy is preparing to go off to college. The toys are mistakenly donated to a daycare which is controlled by mean toys. They escape and are eventually donated to a new child who will play with them.

At the heart of these movies is a struggle. What does one do when one only has a limited timeline? How do you choose to behave? How do you face knowing that things will come to an end? Though we are not toys, we all face this challenge. As good as we may feel today, we will all reach an end. Our lives do not go on forever. How do we choose to use the time that we are given? The High Holidays bid us to think through these questions as they remind of us of our mortality. They ask us to consider the paths in life we are choosing and how we are intentionally using the limited time we have been given.

It is interesting how the movies answer these questions. First, they suggest that it is important that you treasure the time that is given to you. In particular, they argue that the greatest things in life are loving another and experiencing being loved. Second, they make the point that you should focus on doing what you were created to do. If you were made a toy, you should work on being the best toy and making a child happy. Third, they present the message that friendship and companionship is what will see you through the tough times and difficult periods. At the end of the second movie, Buzz asks Woody if he is still concerned about the time when Andy grows up. Woody says that he will enjoy the time while he has it, and anyway, he will have Buzz with whom to share the time after that.

As a side note, the fourth movie is interesting. People wondered if it made sense to make a fourth movie, or was Pixar just trying to cash in on their old property? The new movie does have something to say. I do not want to ruin it for you, but it suggests that, as time passes, we can have the courage to find a new purpose for our lives. Woody finds a new purpose for himself. The movie suggests it is possible to get energized about a new goal and focus on different ways to love. Also, it suggests that after we have spent out time serving others, we can take time to just enjoy life.

These popular movies sync well with our tradition. Judaism makes similar points to us, without the toys. It places a great emphasis on love. Love is so important that it is supposed to serve as one of the main aspects of our relationship with G-d. We are told in the "V'ahavta" that "You shall love Hashem your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might." Now, we can ask what type of love this is. There is some sense in the tradition that it might be more about showing loyalty to G-d and following G-d's commandments. However, the tradition does talk about this love in other ways

than just loyalty. We get the idea that there is a warmer relationship between the people of Israel and G-d. Earlier in the Shema section of the service, we talk about the love that G-d has for us. The commandments that we are supposed to follow are said to have been given to us as an expression of G-d's love for us.

The tradition goes as far as to understand the book The Song of Songs, which poetically talks about the love of two people, as standing for the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. Song of Songs is also a celebration of the love between human beings, and we include a quote from it in our marriage ceremonies. We also know of the emphasis that Jewish culture places on family and creating a loving environment in the home.

Personally, I have seen how love can be the most important thing in life. As many of you know, my father passed away this past year. Part of what has been so hard about this is seeing something wonderful that was happening stop. My father was building a magical relationship with my daughter. My wife and I moved back to New England to raise our daughter around family. And my father and daughter just connected in a way that is hard for me to put into words. Their bond was almost physical. My dad was not only able to naturally amuse her. Something else happened. Chloe was not a child who would sit in your lap. Maybe for a minute, but then she would get up and move onto something else. But for some reason, she would remain still in my father's lap, for even twenty minutes at a time. She would just sit there content, almost as if she was just taking in his presence, his love. I have never seen anything like it. My father just loved being with her too. He would light up. In his last years, my father was sick with a terminal illness. But he would say that these visits were quote "giving him life." Giving him life. Being loved by Chloe and loving Chloe was important, more powerful than his illness.

My daughter still talks about my father. We do not think she really understands that he is truly gone, since she is only three years old. I probably mourn the hardest for him when she mentions him though. It catches me right in the gut whenever she says something about us going to visit him or asks us when he is going to visit. However, I appreciate that she still remembers him. I also am incredibly grateful for the time that they did have.

I would also say that my wife and I are not perfect parents. There are probably a hundred things that we are not doing for Chloe that we should be. This feeling that we are missing stuff that would be good for her gnaws at me. However, I take comfort from watching my wife interact with my daughter. She just naturally connects with her and makes her smile in a hundred ways that shows how much we love Chloe. Deborah says that no matter what happens, Chloe will feel in her bones that she is loved by her parents. I hope and pray that we accomplish this goal.

Love and loving can be at the center of our lives. We can make it a priority. This holiday season, we can ask if we are putting enough energy into our loving relationships. Are we doing all we can to strengthen them, or do we neglect taking care of them as we get

distracted by other things in our lives? In addition, do we pay enough attention to our loving relationships to draw out the goodness in them to brighten our daily living? Do we appreciate them enough or do we take them for granted? These questions are important to ask as we explore how we are using the limited time we have on this earth. We can ask if we are filling the time with love.

As in the movies, we are taught by our tradition to try and be our best authentic selves. The toys learn that if you are a toy, you should focus on serving your purpose of making children happy. We learn from our tradition that we are supposed to focus on our true purpose and being the best version of ourselves. There is a classic story about Zusha, the great Chassidic master. He lay crying on his deathbed. His students asked him, "Rebbe, why are you so sad? After all the mitzvahs and good deeds you have done, you will surely get a great reward in heaven!" "I'm scared!" said Zusha. "Because when I get to heaven, I know G-d is not going to ask me 'Why weren't you more like Moses?' or 'Why weren't you more like King David?' But I'm afraid that G-d will ask 'Zusha, why weren't you more like Zusha?' And then what will I say?!" According to this story, in the end, G-d will not ask us if we lived up to the standards of some great leader or role model. We are not meant to be Moses or King David. Rather, we will be asked if we were the best versions of ourselves that we could be.

There is much pressure for us not to be authentic. Society is filled with judgements about what it means to be successful and happy. We are told that we need to look a certain way, go to a particular school, or work in a specific profession. Fitting in requires us to turn away from some of the parts of ourselves that may help make up what makes us unique. On social media, we try to control our image and present ourselves in the best light and, even if this image of us hides our rougher edges. At the same time, we can be distracted from working on the tasks that we were made to do. We need to ask if we are accomplishing our purpose for being on this earth, why we were created. Or are we using our time on other goals and distractions. For example, if we believe we are born to be parents, are we throwing ourselves into this aspect of life and being the best parents we can be. If we believe we were meant to be married to our spouse, do we treat our spouse as a partner in all the loving ways we could. Please remember that the High Holidays are a time for us to examine if we are living as our best selves. We can ask if we are being the people we were supposed to be.

Lastly, just as we learn from the movies, we also learn from our tradition that we should incorporate companionship and friendship into our lives, particularly in difficult times. Early on in the Torah, we are told that it is not good for man to be alone. More specifically, in Pirke Avot we learn that Y'hoshua ben P'rachyah taught "Select a master-teacher for yourself, acquire a colleague for study..." In the Bible, we are given the example of King David and Saul's son Jonathan as models of good friends who care deeply about each other. Our mourning rituals stress the importance of companionship. We put this emphasis on companionship into action by gathering people to console mourners as they sit shivah. Overall, the whole tradition places stress on building community in a hundred ways. For example, we celebrate lifecycle events such as weddings and b'nai mitzvot as a community. The Passover Seder, which is the most

observed Jewish ritual in America, is partially about sharing companionship with the other people in attendance.

Companionship and friendship are not so easy to find in this day and age though Some of the institutions that served to link people have gone into decline. For example, synagogues are not as popular as they used to be. With this decline, it can be harder to find companionship and friendship. Also, our lives are so full of programming and events and we are so busy that we have little time to connect with others. Social media makes us feel like we are connected, but the connections are more shallow than real life connections. Posting something on Facebook is not the same experience as talking in person with a friend. Unfortunately, many of us are haunted by a sense of loneliness. We go from home to our jobs without experiencing much of the warmth of companionship. But one of the ways we handle the difficulties in our lives is through sharing them with other people. We also gain joy and happiness from being connected to others. In this new year, we can look to renew our links to friends and family. We can put emphasis on making sure that our relationships to important people in our lives are fresh and deep. We can reach out more to others, and benefit from what comes back to us. We need to remember that our relationships play a crucial role in making us feel more whole and help us cope with the challenges we face.

We cannot always predict from where we are going to learn life lessons. Sometimes, the source can be series of children's movies. What is important is that we stay open to wisdom from wherever we receive it. The Toy Story movies have been very successful. Part of their success can be attributed to the messages they give the audience: Loving and being loved is the most important thing in life, be your true self, and bring friendship and companionship into your life. May we keep these messages in mind as we reflect on our choices from both the past year and look to how we want to live in the future. I want to wish you love, authenticity, and companionship in the year ahead.

L'shanah tovah! To infinity and beyond!