

## THE DAY YOU FIND OUT WHY

**Yom Kippur Morning, 5784**

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For me, this Yom Kippur service began way back on a bright spring afternoon while driving home from a cemetery on Long Island, listening to WQXR Classical Radio.

Fittingly for a post-funeral drive, on came the familiar strains of Mozart's *Requiem*, the Catholic Mass for the dead, an undisputed masterwork that the master left unfinished at the time of his death at the age of 35. A little "light traveling music."

As it turns out, *this* recording of the *Requiem* jarred me right up in my seat: it was, first of all, fast: *too fast*, I thought; dance-like, even. Gone was the usual sense of gravity and grief, and, in its place, a vigor and something like mischief.

No surprise, this new recording has attracted its fair share of detractors and defenders, with one critic in the former camp

describing it as “brusque and perfunctory,” and another in the latter praising its “immediacy” and “intensity.”

In any case, I was able to track down the recording, which was released in March and features a performance by a small (26-piece) period instrument ensemble called *Les Concert des Nations*, comprised of players from different countries, and a small (24-voice) choir from Spain<sup>1</sup> under the direction of the Catalan maestro and virtuoso string player Jordi Savall.

The liner notes feature an essay by the 81-year-old conductor, a bit of which I'd like to share with you now:

“The course of my whole life would undoubtedly have been very different,” he begins, “if, one October evening in 1955, I had not been fortunate enough to hear a live rehearsal of Mozart’s *Requiem*.”

“A few months earlier, on 1st August, I had turned 14, and luck would have it that my teacher... decided to prepare the work with the choir of the local Schola Cantorum. That evening I was on my way to the Conservatoire to attend my usual counterpoint and harmony lessons

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<sup>1</sup> Capella Nacional de Catalunya.

with him; for some reason, I didn't receive the message telling me that classes had been cancelled due to a rehearsal of the *Requiem*.

“So I discreetly sat in on the rehearsal at the back of the hall, where the choir... was accompanied by just an organ and a string quartet. From the very first notes, I was totally fascinated by the incredible beauty of the work and the expressive power of the melodies, by every movement, by the originality of the various themes and the perfection of the counterpoint and the richness of the modulations. By the time the final bars sounded, I had been profoundly moved by this extraordinary experience, which transported me to a dimension I had never experienced before.

“As I walked home, I said to myself that if music could touch a person's soul so powerfully, I wanted to be a musician.

“A few days later, I went to Barcelona to buy a second-hand cello. On my way home, I tried to play a little and, after the first few moments of hesitation, I suddenly felt a great affinity with the instrument. The fingers of my left hand positioned themselves and moved easily and deftly on the neck of the instrument, while, with little effort, my right hand was quickly able to control the quality of the sound with the

bow. In short, I had the wonderful feeling of being able to sing again and I felt completely at home!

It was then that I understood the unique feeling described by Mark Twain when he said that ‘The two most important days of your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.’”<sup>2</sup>

I read this story of the 14-year old Jordi Savall hearing Mozart’s *Requiem* for the first time, picking up his first cello, dragging the bow across the strings, hesitantly at first, then with greater confidence and ease; in time feeling the instrument vibrating in tandem with his body; developing the muscle memory to know where to put his fingers on the neck; his hands, ears, head and heart gradually falling into alignment; learning, by doing, how to make it sing—and I remembered a time in my life where, for lack of a better way of putting it, it all came together.

It was early fall, 1992, the beginning of my sophomore year of college, and I had just turned nineteen. Most of my classmates had spent freshman year figuring out the answers to important questions like these:

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<sup>2</sup> You can read Savall’s essay, and explore the recording, online at <https://www.highresaudio.com/en/album/view/e84q8a/jordi-savall-w-a-mozart-requiem-in-d-minor-k-626>.

- *Rounding to the nearest 30 minutes, what is the minimum amount of sleep that I need in order not to come off like an idiot on my chemistry midterm?*

And,

- *Expressed as a percentage, how much of my monthly budget can I reasonably spend on (the admittedly excellent) slices from Antonio's?*

Meanwhile, I was turning myself into knots over *this* question:

*What am I going to do with my life?*

I may not have been the most fun to be around, but I was definitely going to be the first of my roommates to figure out my career path.

I had spent most of freshman year second-guessing my plans to major in geology and pursue a career in environmental science. An exploratory dinner conversation with a hydrogeologist (that is, a person who tracks groundwater for a living) was, ironically, dry as a

bone, and a field trip to unearth clamshells for a course in invertebrate paleontology, left me cold, especially the part where I found myself knee-deep in thick Cape Cod muck at 7 AM wondering how I would ever survive a career that featured so much dirt.

Long story short, I began to contemplate alternative pathways for my life that felt like a better fit.

Monday, September 28th, 1992—Rosh Ha-Shanah—was a quintessential New England early fall day: bright sunshine, crisp breeze, temperatures in the mid-sixties. As sunlight streamed through Johnson Chapel, the ecumenical space where Amherst and Smith College Hillel chapters join forces for the High Holidays, I sat in a pew about seven rows back and, some time during the chanting of the *Unetaneh Tokef*, a realization struck me. I'm sure it didn't take the form of words at the time, but, to me, it felt like the universe saying: "You're supposed to be up there on that *bimah*."

In that moment, many pieces of my life came together: my love of Judaism, my desire to share it with others, to share its message of hope and its profound insights into the human condition in word and in song, in art and ritual, to teach and to learn, to shape lives in a

direction of meaning: these are some of the vibrations that resonated within me during that service.

Within days I had changed my major to English literature and set an appointment with the Hillel director, Rabbi Yechiael Lander (still alive and well at 96 years old!), to talk about my aspirations. From the very first, he encouraged and supported my path and assured me that becoming a rabbi was a wonderful profession for a nice Jewish boy.

I feel blessed that, for me, “the day you find out why” happened when I was 19 and turned out to have spoken true and clear. I have also come to believe that a “calling” is not reserved for clergy and does not require any special connection to God or spirituality.

Each of us has a calling, maybe more than one. Probably more than one! Each of us can respond to an urging that comes from either within or without: a way through life in which we can participate with purpose and presence in the unfolding of the world.

To hear the call, to feel the urge, to respond with our innermost being: these are not privileges reserved for people of the cloth; any person in any clothing can discover what resonates with one's soul.

“Calling” is also not to be equated with career. The two may overlap entirely, or partially, or not at all. We know people who practice medicine, law, economics, psychotherapy; who are teachers and cooks and copywriters, athletes and entrepreneurs and countless other ways through the world, each of whom experienced a day they found out why.

We also know people who who “found out why” the day a child, or grandchild, or pet, or another grown person came into their lives, transforming one another through relationship; people who “found out why” when they studied with a teacher, or read a book, or heard a song, or saw a work of art that changed the direction of their life; people who heard the call in the solitude of a mountain hike and people who heard the call in the crowd.

Every moment of calling is about recognizing a connection with something greater than ourselves. Some people would call that something “Nature,” others, “The Universe,” still others, “God.”



Maestro Savall heard the call when he picked up a cello and felt a sudden affinity for the instrument. The bow in his hands passed over the strings and instantly the vibrations of the strings passed through his hand into his body.

It is like this, I think, for many of us: a moment, hard to put into words, but perceptible nonetheless, when the vibrations of the universe resonate at the same frequency as the vibrations within us. If this was you—as you sit here today and reflect—can you think of such a moment?

But what of those of us who haven't felt the vibrations, who haven't heard the call, who haven't lived "the day you find out why?"

And what about those who *have* felt the vibrations, but doubted them when others pooh-poohed them? Maybe they told you your purpose was invalid, not worthy—especially if untethered to a paycheck.

Or what of those who once heard the call, but then things changed? I know so many people who describe their greatest fear, or their greatest sorrow, as "lack of purpose." Many of them have suffered the

loss of a person or profession that infused their lives with beauty or goodness, energy or meaning or all of these. A brilliant surgeon debilitated by neuropathy, where the physical pain pales next to the injury to vocation (and sense of self-worth); a parent who has buried a child; a business owner who built the operation from scratch and had to close down during the pandemic.

And what about those for whom the call stopped sounding, the vibrations stopped vibrating? Last year, the *New York Times* featured a podcast interview with Dan White, Jr., a former church pastor who was diagnosed with symptoms of PTSD brought on by the stress of managing his congregation in a climate of growing political rancor, increasingly vindictive criticism directed at church leaders, and just plain burnout. He noticed that he was not alone; he would meet pastor after pastor whose love for the church remained undiminished but who found the role they were asked to fulfill in the lives of others to be unlivable for themselves, and decided to call it quits. Now Pastor White spends his days coaching and helping other pastors through their challenges.<sup>3</sup> This “Great Pastor Resignation” mirrors recent trends in the Jewish clergy world as well; and, just as clergy are

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<sup>3</sup> See/listen to “A Pastor Ripped Apart by our Divided Country,” Recording and Transcript available at *New York Times* (online edition), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/21/opinion/a-pastor-burned-out-by-our-divided-country.html>.

not unique in the ability to have a calling, so too are they not unique in their ability to hear the call no longer, to have it snuffed out.

Things change. The “day you find out why” turns out just to be one day, a day that mattered when it mattered, but not a day that should dictate all the days of your life.

In 1958, the journalist Hunter S. Thompson wrote a letter to his friend Hume Logan in response to a request for life advice. What he wrote in that letter offers wisdom far beyond the author’s 22 years.

It also illustrates why Thompson became an icon of the counterculture. In the letter, he takes direct aim at the conventional advice that a person should set goals and follow them, telling his friend instead that the real question is “whether to float with the tide, or to swim for a goal.”

“[T]he tragedy of life,” he goes on to say, “is that we seek to understand the goal and not the man.” He illustrates:

When you were young, let us say that you wanted to be a fireman. I feel reasonably safe in saying that you no longer

want to be a fireman. Why? Because your perspective has changed. It's not the fireman who has changed, but you... As your experiences differ and multiply, you become a different man, and hence your perspective changes. This goes on and on. Every reaction is a learning process; every significant experience alters your perspective.

So it would seem foolish, would it not, to adjust our lives to the demands of a goal we see from a different angle every day? How could we ever hope to accomplish anything other than galloping neurosis?

The answer, then, must not deal with goals at all, or not with tangible goals, anyway... So we do not strive to be firemen, we do not strive to be bankers, nor policemen, nor doctors. **WE STRIVE TO BE OURSELVES.**"<sup>4</sup>

What Thompson is saying is that, until or unless we love where we're going, we should spend our time floating rather than swimming.

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<sup>4</sup> You can find Thompson's letter online; I recommend seeking it out among the many other fine entries in the book *Letters of Note: Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Audience*, ed. Shaun Usher. Edinburgh/London: Canongate UK, 2016.

This is a great truth of existence: The universe is in constant flux, and we along with it. In the Vedic tradition, the great source of Eastern spirituality that flourished in the Indian subcontinent around the same time that the Torah was taking shape in *Eretz Yisrael*, we learn of the flow, the never-ending cycle of existence: Creation, Maintenance, and Destruction.

Naturally resistant to change, we human beings often seek security in the maintenance of the status quo when in fact Nature insistently prods us toward destruction or creation: of the self, our goals, our way through the world. Indeed, both are necessary for evolution: destruction clears the way for creation of the new; and the natural order of things is that destruction begins the moment after creation. Life is meant to be dynamic. Life is fluid, so why not your purpose? Maybe we're spending all this time swimming toward a goal, when, all along, we should have been figuring out how to float.

So here we are, having floated all this way to the Yom Kippur message that I hope you will carry with you. It comes to us from Avraham Yitzhak Kook, the Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of pre-State Israel, and one of the most influential Jewish thinkers of his age, or any age.

Rav Kook teaches:

“The primary role of *Teshuva*... is for a person to return to oneself, to the root of one’s own soul.”<sup>5</sup>

For Rav Kook, *Teshuva* should not be translated the way we usually do, as “repentance,” a “word that conjures up a negative sense of feeling sorry and broken for our misdeeds or moral shortcomings.”

For Kook, Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider explains, “*Teshuva* is empowering and invigorating. *Teshuva* is a return to our true selves – bringing ourselves back to center.”<sup>6</sup>

Rav Kook affirms: “*Teshuva* is when the soul feels the healthiest.”<sup>7</sup>

The essence of Yom Kippur is not the fasting, the beating of the chest, the confession of transgression. We do not come here today to indulge in self-flagellation, to wallow in guilt or pity, “to put on sackcloth and ashes and bow our heads like a reed,” as the Prophet said.<sup>8</sup> The essence of today is *Teshuva*: to nurture our souls back to

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<sup>5</sup> *Orot Ha-Teshuva*, 15:10.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider, “Reimagining Repentance,” as cited on the website of the Orthodox Union, <https://www.ou.org/holidays/reimagining-repentance/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 5:1.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 58:5, which is taken from the *Haftarah* for the morning of Yom Kippur.

health and vitality. To bring ourselves back to the center. To stop swimming for a day and remember what it feels like to float.

And if we're still seeking the way, if we're still hoping to "find out why" we're here in the first place, consider this approach: instead of casting about, waiting for our purpose to announce itself, waiting to hear the call, we can just float in the direction of serving others.

There's a world of need out there; countless ways to serve; countless ways to connect to something greater than yourself. Who knows? Maybe some other fellow seekers will find their purpose for the first time when they meet *you*.

*"The two most important days of your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why."*

Well, maybe, Mark Twain, but maybe not.

Maybe it's not just two days. It could be thousands. Who can say?

Who knows when you'll find out?

Maybe it'll be tomorrow, or the tomorrow after that.

Who knows?

One of these days might just turn out to be the most important day of your life.