



Yom Kippur 2011

“PURPOSE”

Introductory Remarks by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

One of the messages that we deliver in Humanistic Judaism is that the universe is uncaring and amoral. Nature doesn't reward our good behavior with a good harvest, nor does it punish our bad behavior with flooding or a drought. It just is. Our task is not to make a causal connection or determine how we can placate the weather god to give us a break. Rather, our job is to figure out how to manage the world as it is and, in the face of cynicism, figure out how we can take steps to fix what is broken and improve it.

This is sometimes easier said than done, especially in the face of sadness and tragedy. Under these circumstances, life can lose its meaning and purpose and feel despairing and hopeless.

Of course, this also presumes that life has intrinsic value, that it is not a tale “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

One website I saw catalogues a long list of possible purposes, ranging from seeking pleasure or seeking power, to survival and replication of the species, and my favorite, “becoming the person you've always wanted to be.” Another choice is that perhaps the “meaning of life” is to forget about the search for the meaning of life and just get on with it.

I have often thought that it is a privilege of luxury and leisure to be able to think about these matters in the first place. And even if we do have the time for such reflection, I highly doubt that many of us engage in these questions on a daily basis.

This is where the High Holidays come in, because they carve out time for us to engage in this kind of introspection. We can all be idle philosophers today who ponder the purposes of life generally and our lives more specifically.

We have invited two of our members to take up these questions and share their thoughts with us today. They are Mark Wilson and Trudy Elins. There will be no formal discussion following these remarks. Instead, we hope they will inspire more informal conversation afterwards during our break.