

There's Always More to Do

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As a kid, Zora dreamt that she had superpowers.¹ Like the heroes in comic books and on the big screen, in her dreams she was incredibly strong, able to fight and defeat bag guys, have long flowing hair, shoot lightning out of her hands, and be incredibly muscular. So, when she was twelve, she decided to turn her dream into a reality. She made a list of thirty skills you need if you want to be a superhero, and decided that when she turned twenty-three, she would have mastered the list.

Her list included: martial arts, hang gliding, mountain climbing, bodybuilding, emergency medicine, archery, and sailing. It also included herbology, rafting, hunting and tracking, evasive driving, French, Arabic and Spanish. It included metaphysics, politics, camel and elephant riding, helicopter and airplane flying, and demolitions.

And then, she got to work. She raced through school, completing a year of coursework in one summer to devote the rest of the year to training. She accomplished nearly everything on the list, becoming as close as she could manage to a superhero. She wanted to put her skills to use as a CIA agent, but the agency rejected her. She works as a private investigator on cases related to kidnapping, child abductions, and cons. She accomplished her goals, enjoys her work, and then create a new list. But not one to save the world. Been there, done that. Now, her list includes tennis, singing, and comedy. Zora wants to focus on hobbies and talents to round herself after so narrowly pursuing one agenda for so long. but she still has a list.

We all make lists: grocery lists, wish lists, gift lists, invite lists, to do lists, bucket lists, and more. Sometimes, it feels like our lists run our lives. They guide our every movement and how we plan the day. Sometimes, when we write something on a list, we feel compelled to check it off. And when we can't, whether it is a to do list, a home

¹ Zora's story was told on *This American Life*, Episode 508 "Superpowers," first aired October 18, 2013.

project list, or a bucket list, that item can begin to loom large, consuming our thoughts and days. Rather than our lists controlling us, however, our lists are a place to express our values.

The rabbis of the Talmud loved lists too. They created lists of the four categories of things that cause damage and five kinds of damages that deserve restitution. They listed thirty-nine categories of prohibited work on Shabbat and fifteen kinds of forbidden marriages. However, there is a unique quirk about rabbinic lists: when they mention a specific number, it means they are excluding something from the list. Someone might want to list six kinds of restitution, but the rabbis make their list saying there are only five. There are fifteen kinds of forbidden marriage, without a sixteenth one rabbi thought to add. They constructed their lists to purposefully leave something off, making a statement: these, and only these, deserve to be on our list.

The rabbis teach us that lists are inherently exclusionary, and that's ok. Even preferred. A list for the rabbis is a positive statement of belief and ideas: THESE are the things that I value, that are important to me. I know many other things could make this bucket list, but I am limiting it. I only need two onions, not seven. I want to visit these three places, not every country in the world. I want to read these five books, not these other ones. I have room for thirty people at my party, not forty-five.

The exact quantity or composition of the list is not what is important. Rather, our lists should accurately reflect our values and priorities at that moment in time. Like the rabbis, we can make a specific list, being willing to exclude other items to make a statement about our values and what we choose to include.

In her book *The Art of Gathering*, Priya Parker writes about crafting gatherings with a specific purpose, carefully chosen participants, and a clear plan. In her chapter on creating guest lists, she writes about the need to match the list to the purpose of the gathering. Over-inviting is easy because we are pained to exclude someone. No one wants to be the bearer of rejection, or the social slight of not extending an invitation. However, she teaches that we also need to know our limits. She writes, "If everyone is invited, no one is invited - in the sense of truly being held by the group. By closing the

door, you create the room.”² When we close the door, we ensure there is enough space inside to truly connect with the people we invited and the goals we gathered around. By ensuring we are intentional in creating our lists, we demonstrate our care and intention in its crafting, always guided by our values.

Parker is quick to recognize that we often violate this principle with guests lists, often for good reason. She emphasizes that the goal is not exclusion, but intentionality. Each person on our list should be there for a reason, and others might be best invited to a different gathering, for a different vision. We should not make lists exclusive for exclusivity's sake, but rather demonstrate our values, and the value of the gathering, by ensuring that we are thoughtful on who we invite, who we add to the list.

This principle is not just for guests, but for all aspects of our life. We cannot fix everything in our home we wish to this month, so we craft an achievable list based on urgency, maximal value, and time. As we age, we cannot accomplish everything so we focus our bucket lists on what we can achieve and what will bring us the most joy and satisfaction. We recognize our friends and family do not have unlimited funds, so we create a holiday wish list that we both look forward to and is in reach for others.

This Shabbat is Shabbat Shuvah, the Shabbat of return, falling between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In the middle of these days of repentance, we take stock of who have been, and who we want to become. We reflect on our actions and behavior, considering which we are proud of, which we want to change.

Each year at this time, I am confronted by two truths: There are many things I want to change. And, I cannot do all of this this year. We each have to decide what it is we want to focus on the year ahead, which items go on the list. Leaving something off the list doesn't negate its importance, nor that you don't recognize the desire to change, nor are you locked into that choice forever. Rather, it affirms we that we are humans, with limited capacities, budgets, and time. We must choose what goes on the list, what we will focus on right now.

² Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, 38.

In Hebrew, there is a saying, "*tafasta meruba lo tafasta; tafasta m'at tafasta.*" If you carry a lot you will carry nothing; if you carry a little you will hold on. Originating in the Talmud, this phrase has entered modern Hebrew to remind us that to try to carry too much stuff means we will drop it all. If we put too many things on our list, we minimize the ability to accomplish any of them. Instead, when we are selective, purposeful, and narrowly tailored, we can succeed.

When we decide what to put on our lists, as mundane as our grocery lists or as personal as our list of personal self-improvements in the new year, we aim not to be controlled by what feels unavoidable, but craft a list that best represents our values and desires. And, we recognize that these lists change over time. We accomplish some of them, others rise or fall in importance, we feel the desire to focus on one thing or another.

The work of creating, writing, and working on our list is never-ending. But, as Rabbi Tarfon says in *Pirkei Avot* - a collection of ethical sayings and pieces of wisdom, "It is not your responsibility to complete the work, but neither are you free to neglect it" (2:16). There is always more to do, more things to put on our list, more people to invite and more projects to complete. The challenge is not coming up with work, but figuring out which part of the work we are doing today; which part of the work ends up on your list this week, this month, this year. The challenge that confronts each of us in the new year is, "among all the possibilities of what we could put on our hopes and wishes for the year ahead, which are we going to choose?"

As Rabba Tamar Elad-Appelbaum teaches, "The person of faith must know the labor of faith is never done, never truly over. Its questions are never exhausted, and its solutions never really suffice to keep the spirit from drying out, or to keep the seeds of longing from being sown anew each season of our lives."³ When we accomplish our list, we know that there will be a new one. We will have new questions, different goals, other dreams. Rabba Elad-Appelbaum reminds us that in each season of our lives, our spirit guides us to different longings, discovering new solutions, and pursuing another set of

³ Rabbi Gordon Tucker and Rabba Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, *Pirkei Avot Lev Shalem* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2018), 101.

answers. The list that helped us get this far no longer reflects our values or desires. So, we craft a new list, intentionally centering new tasks, questions, values, and goals.

May the year ahead be one of choosing, creating lists that leave something off to allow us to pursue who we wish to become. Ken Yhi Ratzon.