

Notes for Chapter One

Viktor Frankl (p. 3)

The subtitle of Rabbi Sacks' book is "The Ethics of Responsibility," and he begins the book with a quote from Viktor Frankl, one of his guiding lights: "Being human means being conscious and being responsible." (He will say more about Frankl in a later chapter.) I have had two personal connections with Frankl, and his little book *Man's Search for Meaning* is one of the more memorable books I have read. So I wanted to give a brief presentation about him by way of introduction to our discussion.

Viktor Frankl was born in Vienna in 1905 and as a teenager developed an interest in psychology and even corresponded with Freud. In the 1920s, Frankl studied medicine at the University of Vienna with a particular focus on depression and suicide. As a medical student he organized youth counseling centers to address the issue of teen suicide, and in the 1930s he headed a female suicide prevention program at a psychiatric hospital. The Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938 limited his opportunity to treat patients, because he was Jewish.

In 1942, shortly after his marriage, he and his family (wife, parents, siblings) were sent to Theresienstadt concentration camp, and he was to spend the next three years in several camps, including Auschwitz, and lose all of his family members except for one sister. And yet in the midst of that horrific situation he was to develop a distinctly new approach to psychology that emphasized human freedom and responsibility and the importance of finding meaning in life. After the war, he wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* about how his concentration camp experiences helped crystallize his new approach to psychotherapy that helped people focus outward, on the world around them, rather than on their own inner pain.

Frankl's observations and interaction with others in the camps provided the foundation for his thinking. "*We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.*" Frankl says that it is this spiritual freedom that makes life meaningful and purposeful.

In the camps Frankl would counsel suicidal inmates (even though it was prohibited by the Nazis to try to keep people from committing suicide). They had lost any sense of hope, and would tell him, "I have nothing to expect from life anymore." Frankl offered a different perspective. "*We had to teach the despairing men that it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us.*" Long before Rick Warren, Frankl argued that everyone has a specific purpose or set of tasks that life is putting before us and it is that purpose that gives meaning to our individual lives. That

shift in viewpoint for Frankl was the key to mental health, and was central to his psychological approach. And it kept him from despair even in Auschwitz.

A good friend of mine studied under Frankl, and later wrote a book about his friendship with Frankl, which he titled *When Life Calls Out to Us*. I actually helped edit the book. He sent me chapters as he was writing for comments. Unfortunately, a few years ago I lent my copy to my former primary care physician, Susan Frankl, who was a grandniece of Viktor, and never got it back.

The title of that book points to this central theme in Frankl's writings, that there is meaning to be found in life, not just a general "big picture" meaning but a specific purpose (or set of purposes) that life places before each of us as individuals. We each have a "calling" in life.

What I personally got out of *Man's Search for Meaning* when I first read it in college was the sense that an obsessive inward focus, which is the core of the Freudian approach, can only accomplish so much and may be actually detrimental to your development. Frankl asks us to redirect our focus outward, to the world around us and to the needs of others. Frankl comments: "*The more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love—the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself. Self-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.*"

That, I think in a nutshell, is the heart of Rabbi Sacks' book. "Life," says Rabbi Sacks, "is God's call to responsibility" (p. 3).

One final personal note: years ago when I was living in Connecticut and working at the Children's Home where my friend was director, I was going through a particularly rough, painful time and my friend offered to counsel me professionally, as he would have done with a patient. But because of our friendship he did not want to charge me money for it so instead he suggested that in exchange for the sessions, I could baby sit their three year old son. They had a newborn who had some sort of rare medical condition and was being kept at Yale Hospital, about 45 minutes from where we were, so the parents were making regular trips there. Thinking back on this all these years later, I realize that, consciously or not, my friend was offering me a kind of Frankl-style therapy, giving me a task, a small but significant purpose that redirected my focus from myself and what I was going through to the needs of others.

Lamed-Vavniks (or Vovniks) (p. 11)

A legend from mystical Judaism, based on passages in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 97b, *Sukkah* 45b), that there are 36 righteous men living in the world at any one time, whose virtue keeps the world from destruction. Hebrew uses letters for numbers, so *lamed* is 30 and *vav* is 6. (Other passages in the Talmud mention different numbers.) The idea may be based on Genesis 18, where God tells Abraham that Sodom and Gomorrah will be spared if he can find a certain minimum of righteous people.

There are two aspects to this legend that I particularly like. The first, mentioned by Rabbi Sacks, is that these people are anonymous, unknown even to themselves. They are

unaware of the powerful effect of their righteousness in the world. Jewish tradition calls them the “hidden righteous ones.” They live ordinary lives and don’t walk around with halos over their heads or trumpet their piety for everyone to hear. But their small, unself-conscious acts of kindness serve to uphold the world. This legend has helped me more than anything else I have read to understand what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 6, about not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing when you give charity. And it connects with what Frankl said about becoming truly human through self-transcendence, by focusing on the other.

We had a recent example of this at Bethel. Two local candidates showed up one Sunday and spoke briefly during the service. The first spoke proudly of all his accomplishments in his church and his many years of service there in various capacities and on and on and vote for me, me, me. The second spoke passionately about the need for serious prison reform, for helping those who have been oppressed and brutalized by our political system, and he said not one word about himself. He focused our attention exclusively on the pressing needs of others. I said to Susan afterwards: the one spoke like a Christian, the other like a politician.

The other implication of this idea is that you never know who these hidden saints are, so don’t judge a book by its cover. The people you least suspect may be the most important in God’s eyes. I have certainly found this to be true in the church. Again, this connects for me to what Jesus said about the last being first and the first last, that those who are in the world’s limelight, who have wealth and power and position and public acclaim, aren’t necessarily the one’s who will receive honor and status in God’s kingdom.