

Shai Agassi

Entrepreneur

'The distance between failure and success is minuscule'

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Israeli-American entrepreneur Shai Agassi is revolutionizing the automobile industry by reducing the dependence on oil with a holistic electric car system.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Doing the right thing. Which of course means something different for every person. But I mean doing the right thing in the general sense.

One day I heard that the meaning of the whole Jewish religion could be explained into one sentence: do unto others what you would like them to do unto you. The rest of the Bible is just an interpretation of that one sentence. And to me, the summary of that sentence is 'do the right thing'.

What has "doing the right thing" meant in your life?

When I was a kid, I was just young and stupid. In my early twenties, I went on record saying that my goal in life is to retire at 30. I think that each generation tries to fix the failings of the previous ones. I saw my dad work at 40, 50, then start a new career and so on. So I always wanted to be in a position to retire at 30 and do whatever I want. Interestingly enough, I sold my company for the first time the day after my 30th birthday.

And I keep telling people that I just meandered from that point on. I somehow grabbed on to a stream and went along with it.

I did not have a plan of what one does after. So I stayed with the company that had purchased mine, became the CEO and three years later sold it again, this time to [world largest business software company] SAP. And I stayed at SAP, once more because I had no other plan. There was no other mission that called out to me and said "come do this". And thus somehow, I got from a job to a career. The traps of a career are really evil. You get bigger and bigger wingspan but you always know that the wings are stamped with someone else's logo. Then it is really, really hard, scary, frightening to let go of those wings. A lot of people forget that they had their own wings before they put on someone else's wings on. They do not use them and end up like the Galapagos birds who cannot fly anymore because they found food on the ground and forgot how to fly. I actually got to such a point, but then got really lucky.

Basically, I ran the Jim Collins exercise, and in the cross section of passion, skills and economic drive, I found a question that became my mission in life. From that moment on, in the middle of 2005, the career path was trumped intellectually and emotionally – regardless of the fact that it was leading me to a point way beyond my wildest imagination when I had first started at SAP. Compared to embracing my mission, it was just not a fair competition or a fair fight.

I keep saying that it is as if the question had found me, more than me finding the question. And my sense is that everybody has got their question out there. But very few are lucky enough to have their question find them. From that point on you are on a mission, you are on a calling.

What is the Question?

It all started with Klaus Schwabb's question to the Young Global Leaders – "what are you doing to make the world a better place by 2020?". At the YGL, you get drawn out from your micro world and given a macro perspective of what is happening in the world, of the very tight yet not obvious links between energy, governance, poverty, health, climate and so on. They are so deeply interlinked, yet on a daily basis we get drawn into the micro-aspects of one of them, whether in a business, an NGO or anywhere else. So for instance we go out there trying to deal with poverty in Africa, forgetting that here somebody else is generating fuel out of corn, therefore jeopardizing all the work that we do. We deal with governance and discuss the pros and cons of democracy coming first, without realizing that the annual \$4 trillion wealth transfer through oil makes a mockery of that discussion.

So first we got a macro perspective and then we could understand that whatever we do at the micro level may actually not have a significant impact on the macro. From that point on, we could find our question.

And my question is "how to run a country without oil?".

Indeed, I saw oil as the root cause of a lot of different processes and transformations affecting the world.

I then started researching the issue, asking many questions to a lot of people, and when it reverted back to a solution, I met President Peres who asked me: "why would you do anything else, rather than solving this problem, as it is your mission in life?". I was still at SAP, waiting to become its CEO, but this question triggered the final step, and I jumped into the unknown.

Actually, from the minute I had found my question and the solution was in place, every single person on the way was a significant gravity centre that pushed me into making the right decision. From that moment on, there were no doubts, just growing conviction every day.

So watching this chain of events, would you say it is all about randomness? Why did the Question find you?

Is everything happening just by chance? I can't tell you. I asked one day a great physicist about what happened in the universe before the Big Bang. He said "nothing". I told him he sounded like the people who believe the earth stands on the back of an elephant, itself standing on a turtle, which also stands on another turtle and so on. He agreed that it was pretty much the same thing.

When we try and explain those occurrences, we get too close to looking for a trend in randomness. And I am very careful not to get down that path. Otherwise it would mean I am someone special and I do not believe so. Had I not found that question and gone on that mission, the question would have found somebody else.

Basically, I work really hard in life, I did a lot of things at a very young age. I got educated through a path that could not have been predicted. I sold companies that could have just as well gone bankrupt. The distance between failure and success is so minuscule you probably can't even see it with a magnifying microscope. The same story could have ended up in so many other alternative endings and solutions. So I cannot tell you there is a predetermined path or divine intervention in this.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

If there is such a thing, I was not purveyed to the desire of that divine power in pushing things around. So I do not assume it, nor do I accept that everything in my life has been designed by some top force. I just assume that if it is there, it works in mysterious ways. And if it is there, I need as much help from it as possible. I will need all the divine intervention there can be to make this mission happen!

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

I practice Zen in my business experience. I continuously evaluate what I do, trying to simplify everything until you cannot take anything away from it without breaking it. I work through continuous processes in which I try to simplify again and again what it is that we offer, buy, sell, the value proposition we bring, the relationship with the people we work with, how we maintain and improve it and so on. That simplicity keeps me focused.

Where do you find the energy at times of real difficulties & challenges?

Back at home.

What is the role of Judaism in your life?

In the US there is a significant separation between State and Church. But because the very reason for Israel's existence is based on its Jewish identity, it is legitimate that as a kid growing up there, you would be taught Jewish values, stories, morality and so on. It all became part of us, though the emphasis never was on the ceremonial side of religion. You will actually often find that secular Israelis

are significantly less observant of the ritualistic side of religion than secular Jews outside of Israel, who need to go through rituals to remind themselves of their Jewish identity. So since we have moved to the US, we make it a point for instance to have a Friday night Shabbat meal with the kids, we teach them stories and so on, because they do not get it on a daily basis as my wife and I did in Israel.

You could see of course a contradiction in us reciting the Kiddush prayer on the one hand, and doubting the existence of the divine on the other. But show me one thing in Judaism that is not about contradiction!

And I always go back to that one sentence explanation of what Judaism is about: "do unto others what you would like them to do unto you". Then I get to the Ten Commandments which is basically a well defined process for maintaining together a countryless nation while wandering towards their land. It is like having a CEO and a COO going up the mountain and saying "we have got to build something really simple, so that all these guys in the tribe understand it, and that we get into Israel with as many men capable to fight as possible". And they put together a few rules so that nobody could question their leadership. No one could declare they talked to another God, as there is only one God. No one could build idols and talk to that one God. Moses and Aron could talk to Him, which established them as the only leaders. Then they set up rules to keep the men intact: one should not kill, one should not steal because somebody may kill you, one should not take someone else's wife because her husband would kill you. This does not mean by the way that you could not be with another woman, as long as she is not married. So there is nothing moralistic in this, it is all about maintaining the tribe intact.

Then you go to today's world, and you see that we have effectively extended the Ten Commandments to keep the community. And that community is amongst the few that survived without a country, because it was actually built for a countryless nation.

What I would like to see though, is a continuous renewing process. Such a process took place throughout the history of the Jewish people. Judaism was kept not through stalling religion but by constantly refreshing it to maintain the current state. And we have a very different state today than a hundred years ago.

Of course it is very important to maintain the values, the morals and the core process that kept the Jewish people intact. But it is also critical that we refresh Judaism to keep the entire state intact.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

If you think of spirituality as doing the right thing, then what we are trying to do is the right thing, and we keep to it. We keep to a very simple mission, which we think will significantly improve the world, on multiple dimensions – environmental, economical, it will create jobs and so on. And we stick to it. We do not change our course for short term opportunities or gains. We do not take the short path to temporary success. We take the long path to longevity and impact.

I try and instil that in the people I work with. I try to continuously ask them those questions so that they repeat to themselves "this is what we do".

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

I get my inspiration from imaginers. I look at people who conceived an improved way to run the world and were able to go out and execute on that vision, who managed to engineer that imagination.

I actually tend to see the big changes that take place in the world through scientific eyes. So more than spirituality, I would say I am a great study of the history of any business I get into. Some of my favorite books are on Edison, Westinghouse, Tesla and on the early days of the electric world. I draw a lot from that.

I also get a lot of inspiration from people who were able to build institutions that were long lasting. If you look at Israel, I would think of David Ben-Gurion, Shimon Peres and so on. Similarly, I love the stories of the forefathers in the States, the great respectable things that Adams and Jefferson brought into the equation. So I read a lot of biographies of great leaders. There are a lot of lessons you can learn from them in terms of believing in a vision, being able to articulate it, draw people to it, instill the desire and yearning in their hearts. You can also learn a lot from this kind of situation, when you have to create something out of nothing, put form into it and design it for the long term.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

Judaism was probably the first religion to believe in reincarnation, with the idea that after a pause, everyone will be resurrected and come back in the same way. I guess that everyone in the world has such a concept of coming back because otherwise it would make for a very depressing life, it would feel like an empty experience.

But as far as I am concerned, I'd rather not think of what is to come next, I have learnt it is better not to plan the end and rather focus on what I have to do today. And I should not try not to complete this life too early. At a Young Global Leaders gathering in Davos a few years ago, I heard a remarkable story from the former Prime Minister of Poland. He had become Prime Minister at the rather young age of 40 and completed his second term when he turned 50. And in a great moment of frankness he told the group not to become Prime Minister at 40. Because at fifty you are neither expected nor allowed to go back to business or small term politics, you cannot simply become a mayor. So you are supposed to play golf for the next thirty years. And it is the exact opposite of what you would imagine from someone who reached the top of his professional ladder at forty. Some world leaders like Tony Blair were able to find a great path beyond their elected terms, others disappear in some sort of vagueness. So when you study the history of leaders, if you are expected to finish your life at the young age of fifty, it makes for a very long last thirty or forty years of existence...

If there was one question you could ask God, what would it be?

I would have to ask two questions.

The first one would be: what is the masterplan? What were You thinking? Was this the original plan or is it an experiment gone awry?

Then I would have to ask if evil was part of the plan. I am still struggling with human viciousness. The biggest question for me has always been how humans can become animals again to the degree of having a Holocaust. There is a part of humanity I just do not know how to deal with. So if I needed one explanation, that would be it.

To me, there are certain basic fundamentals and thresholds. The basic fundamentals are that you know when you do something good or bad. When you have a human slave, you know that something is not right. When you kill someone for no good reasons, you also know that something is not right. Of course we all have a certain level of threshold we can live with when it comes to what is bad. We do

certain things knowing that no one would get hurt; we do other things knowing people would get hurt but a value would be created in the process. We also do other things knowing that people would get hurt but that they deserve it. But how can we dilute those basics so far as to kill six million people, or go through Darfur? I do not understand how such human beings can be created.

So if there ever was a question about divine intervention, if I ever needed a proof that there isn't one, those are the places to start. And if there is one, then I need an explanation – what were You thinking?

What is your idea of happiness?

It's all relative!

It reminds me of a story about the Olympics. The gold and bronze medallists are happy but the silver medallist isn't. Indeed, the gold medallist knows he could not have done better. The bronze medallist is happy to merely be on the podium. He knows that just one step back and he would not have been there. The silver medallist though always keeps thinking "boy if I had taken one more step it would have been my anthem, my flag, my gold medal". He has nothing to lose, only something to gain.

When I was at SAP, when I did not have my mission in life, I was extremely happy, I was on a beautiful step by step career, towards something that I had started when I was seven years old. When people asked me to describe my situation, I used to say it is like an NBA fan who was called in to play with the Chicago Bulls and Michael Jordan. And I found out that for some odd reason, I was able to play at that level. That is the way I would describe myself four, five years ago. The minute I knew I had something better to do, I was suddenly unhappy at SAP because I was disappointed with myself at not making the right choice. And things that did not annoy me before started to annoy me a lot.

So happiness is extremely relative and once you know what you need to do in life, if you don't do it, you are unhappy.

When I was at SAP, I used to say that as long as there are more good days than bad days, life is OK. I have not had one bad day at Better Place.

So happiness comes from the fact that you find yourself in the cross-section between passion, what you know how to do and being able to do it for a very long time. Because then you wake up in the morning building up rather than grinding down from that day.