

The Sacred Power of This Day: Learning to Begin with the End in Mind
Yom Kippur Morning Drash—Congregation Beth El 5775
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There are many powerful “firsts” happening for me these days, as I return home to Beth El, this time in the role of rabbi. But there was one unexpected one that came just last week, when, for the first time in my life, I put on a kittel. A kittel, in case you wondered, is the name for the white ritual garment that Rabbi Kahn, Rabbi Reuben, and I are all wearing. Kittels are always white and relatively plain, symbolizing an intention towards purity, and are traditionally worn by a man on his wedding day, when leading a Passover Seder, and during the High Holy Days. In preparation for joining the rabbinic team in the leading of Beth El’s Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services, last week I tried on my kittel for the first time.

Standing on this bimah as your rabbi, combined with the power of this time of year, certainly would be enough to make that a memorable and meaningful moment. But the piece that hit me especially hard was the intensity of putting on the very garment in which I might one day be buried. Because you see, in addition to a person’s wedding day, Passover Seder, and High Holy Days, many people are often dressed in their kittel as part of their burial garments. It was an intense moment that definitely gave me pause, even on what was a very busy day. And that, I think, is exactly the point.

Today we are confronted with the reality, not just of death in general, but of our deaths. We are reminded to live each day simultaneously with an awareness of life’s brevity and with a focus on the way we want to be remembered. This one-two punch that comes at the beginning of each New Year is part of Judaism’s recipe for finding both joy and meaning in the fleeting and precious time we have.

Our first High Holy Day reminder of our mortality came in the Rosh Hashanah Amidah, and we find it again in our Yom Kippur liturgy. The U’n’taneh tokef prayer is essentially a list of the ways we might die—reminding us that all of this might end—for any of us, regardless of age—at any moment. Rather than getting bogged down in the theological implications of a God who decides, based on our actions, when each of us will go, I’d like to suggest that this important text could instead come as a wake-up call.

Every year we confront this text again, and in each service during the High Holy Days we recite it. It is a reminder: life is short, and you do not know when it will end.

So, are you living your best life? Are you making the most of the sacred gift of the time you are given?

And it's not just U'n'taneh tokef. On Yom Kippur we also recite a text called the Vidui, a piece of liturgy that is also known as the "deathbed confessional," as it is also traditionally recited by someone who is dying, as close as possible to the moment of his or her death.

Furthermore, last night, towards the beginning of our Kol Nidrei service, we opened the ark and found, inside, the Torah scrolls dressed in white. We took the scrolls out and stood facing these white-clad scrolls and an empty ark as we recited the Kol Nidrei prayer. These are the very symbols of our own death: an empty wooden casket, scrolls robed in white—just as we will be when we are buried, since the traditional Jewish burial garments—kittel or not—are also pure white.

And of course we do all of this—recitation of death-focused liturgy and engagement with death-related imagery—while many of us are making ourselves weak from hunger and thirst. As we encounter these stark textual and symbolic reminders of our own mortality, we are simultaneously acting out, with our bodies, the frailty we may one day feel as we approach the end of our lives.

So apparently Yom Kippur is a morbid holiday, a day on which we are, to some degree, rehearsing our own deaths. What exactly are we meant to gain from this? Not to dwell in death for the sake of depression. Rather, to shake us into awareness. E.M. Forster wrote, "Death destroys a man: the idea of Death saves him."¹ This day comes to remind us that our precious lives *will* end, so we should stop taking life for granted. What will we do with the time we have? How will we make it count?

In his best-selling book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,² Stephen Covey identifies a regular practice of awareness of our own mortality as one of his 7 habits. He titles this habit, "Begin with the end in mind."

Covey writes, "...the most fundamental application of 'begin with the end in mind' is to begin today with the image...of the end of your life as your frame of reference...by which everything else is examined. Each part of your life—today's behavior, tomorrow's behavior, next week's behavior, next month's behavior—can be examined in the context of the whole, or what really matters most to you. By keeping that end clearly in mind, you can make certain that whatever you do on any

¹ As quoted in David B. Feldman & Lee Daniel Kravetz, Supersurvivors. HarperCollins, NY, 2014. Page 97.

² Free Press, NY, 1989. Page 98

particular day does not violate the criteria you have defined as supremely important, and that each day of your life contributes in a meaningful way to the vision you have of your life as a whole.”

Covey goes on to suggest—similar to what we gather to do each Yom Kippur—that we should regularly imagine our own funerals and what will be said about us by those who will come to celebrate our lives and to mourn our deaths. Then, working backwards—that is, beginning with the end in mind—start living our lives now, today, so that we will be remembered the way we want to be remembered. Work daily on the most important relationships in your life, act with integrity, and make choices that will contribute to the bettering of the world around you. In other words, live by the *middot*, the Jewish values that Rabbi Kahn spoke about on Erev Rosh HaShanah. Taking these steps will not only ensure that the mourners at your funeral will remember you the way you hope to be remembered, but will also make every day between now and your last feel richer and more fulfilling.

Our Jewish tradition emphasizes that living a rich and fulfilling life and being remembered well are both dependent not upon building up our material wealth, but upon building strong relationships. In the recent book Supersurvivors, authors David Feldman and Lee Kravetz quote Psychologists Sheldon Solomon, Tom Pyszczynski, and Jeff Greenberg, who “...have spent almost three decades investigating why and how people avoid thinking about death...” According to these three researchers, “...human beings have developed an elaborate set of unconscious defenses to manage the terror of death...” One such distraction is the accumulation of wealth, which can “...serve a key role in distracting and protecting us from the fear of our impending death.”³

In contrast, one way that the Jewish tradition addresses the question of immortality is through significant relationships. When a person dies, we say about her, “May her memory be a blessing.” If we do the difficult work that this season asks of us—to take serious steps towards mending damaged relationships and healing old emotional wounds—then, though Yom Kippur reminds us that we will all one day die, we may yet achieve a kind of Eden-like immortality, as we are remembered with love and respect by the people whose lives we touched, long after our own lives come to an end.

Beginning with the end in mind is exactly what we are here to do today, this Yom Kippur. This day, with all its vivid imagery, is a stark reminder of the reality of our

³ Pages 99 and 105.

eventual end, and offers us the opportunity to make the most of the precious days we have between now and then.

This important focus on making each moment count was apparently central to the daily choices of visionary Steve Jobs. In a now oft-quoted commencement address that he delivered at Stanford in 2005, he said, “Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything — all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure - these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart... Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life.”⁴

This prescription for happiness and success can also be found in the Biblical books of the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. Despite their starkly contrasting tones, both the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes are ultimately books whose message is *carpe diem*. Life is short, Ecclesiastes tells us bluntly, and both books answer this statement by saying, ‘so live well.’ Ecclesiastes opens⁵ and closes⁶ with a declaration that everything is *hevel*—transient or fleeting, like mist. The book is a search for something in human experience that is as permanent as the earth’s natural rhythms, as enduring as some of God’s other inanimate creations. And though Ecclesiastes’ search for permanence is ultimately in vain, he concludes that, precisely because there is nothing permanent in human existence, what is worthwhile in life is sharing joy and pleasure with the people we love.

The message from all of these sources—ancient and contemporary, Jewish and secular—is twofold:

First: let the mortality-focused imagery of this sacred day awaken us to the reality that life is finite—and for many, when we reach the end, it feels painfully short.

Second: use this new awareness, beginning today, to live each of our precious days going forward beginning with the end in mind. Let the awareness of your mortality be a powerful tool to help you make the daily choices that will lead you to live a richer and more meaningful life.

⁴ <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2005/june15/jobs-061505.html>

⁵ Ecclesiastes 1:2

⁶ Conclusion of the main text before the Epilogue. Ecclesiastes 12:8

This Yom Kippur then, with all of its difficult texts and imagery, is really a tremendous gift, if we use it well. Our tradition sets aside a whole day—a whole season really, of which today is just the culmination—to sharpen our focus, and to send us into the New Year with a renewed sense of urgency to live the best we can.

There is a Chasidic story about Satan, known as the “accuser” in the Jewish tradition, who gathered his assistants together one day to talk about the most effective method of destroying the meaning of people’s lives. One minor accuser said, “Tell them there is no God.” Another suggested, “Tell them there is no judgment for sin and they need not worry.” A third proposed, “Tell them their sins are so great they will never be forgiven.” “No,” Satan replied, “none of these things will matter to them. I think we should simply tell them, “There is plenty of time.”

In this New Year, let us not be distracted from the people and pursuits in our lives that matter most by the false belief that we have all the time in the world—we do not have plenty of time. Our Jewish tradition calls to us urgently both today and throughout the year to remember that our time in this life is short. Let us make the most of the sacred time we are given. Ken Y’hi Ratson.