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Temple Beth El

### **Choosing to Live While Standing in the Shadow of Death**

One day a group of American tourists traveling in Eastern Europe, went to visit the Chofetz Chaim. (In the rabbi world, famous rabbis have nicknames). When the tourists came to see him, they saw the world-famous Rabbi in a small study with a rickety desk and only a few books. One of the incredulous tourists asked, “Rabbi, where is all your stuff?” The Chofetz Chaim smiled, “Where is all yours?” “But” the man answered, “we’re just passing through.” The Chofetz Chaim nodded, “Me too.”<sup>1</sup>

We are all just passing through. Perhaps the winds and rain and force of the hurricane remind us this year that life is fleeting. We are born. We live. We experience the sunny days and storms of life. We die. On Yom Kippur, we come face to face with our mortality. We don’t eat or drink. We abstain from bodily desires. We traditionally wear white – yes, even after Labor Day. The white we wear evokes the burial shrouds in which Jews are wrapped when we die. The white robes caution: You are mortal.

It’s really hard – if not impossible – to actually live our lives with the constant knowledge that we may die at any moment. I remember visiting a patient in the trauma ICU. She had been in a terrible accident. I left the hospital and wanted to wrap pillows and protective gear around everyone I love. But walking around looking like the Michelin Man isn’t really living, either. If we lived every single day in fear that we were going to die, we wouldn’t get out of bed and we wouldn’t let our kids out of our sight. So, we find ways to live with the fear, hide from reality and distract ourselves from the hardest truth we have.<sup>2</sup>

When I was a senior in college, my grandmother, Marion, suffered from congestive heart failure. But she had an active social calendar. She served on boards of institutions. She had places to go and people to see. She was clear with her doctors and with us that she wanted bypass surgery. After the surgery, she was exhausted and in pain. By the second day after surgery, it became clear that the trajectory was not good. Her nurses and doctors and our family encouraged her. But she died in the hospital, trying to recover and live.

Two years ago – right after my first Yom Kippur here at Temple Beth El – I flew home to Denver to be with my mother after she had an emergency triple bypass. Thankfully she has recovered beautifully. But there was a day or two where my brother and I were really scared that she wasn’t going to make it. Sitting by her bed brought-up the memories of my grandmother’s surgery. And I had new terrifying considerations. Someday it could be my wife and children in the ICU waiting room or at the funeral home.

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi David Wolpe, [Traveling Man](#).

<sup>2</sup> Inspired by Childish Gambino’s (Donald Glover) powerful music video: [This is America](#). The dancing is a distraction from the gun violence, death, and the misery of the systemic issues in our American society. Once “woke” to what’s actually happening, the singer runs for his life.

We all have, or will face, these kinds of horrible moments. Situations like these and Yom Kippur prompt us ask: Is this the life I want to be leading? Are there ways that I'm living that I want to change? On Yom Kippur We stand at the edge between life and death. For one day, we live in full awareness that our lives won't last. We are forced to see that the line between life and death is extremely thin, completely unpredictable, and all too often, unfair.

The poignant words of *Unetane Tokef* ask: Who shall live and who shall die? We wonder: who will face a project deadline at work and who will miss the afternoon meeting to get a treatment for a mass on her breast while she fights for her life? *Unetane Tokef* asks: Who by fire and who by water? We wonder: who will pick the best wide receiver in the Fantasy Football league and who will die from an aneurism in the prime of his life, leaving behind a spouse and children?<sup>3</sup>

Yom Kippur provides a mirror that reflects truths that we know, but often avoid acknowledging. The gates of life are closing faster than we think, sometimes with no warning or reason. And if they close while we are ignoring or distracted from the truth of our mortality, we will have missed this awesome gift, called life. Yom Kippur calls us to live life with intention, before it ends. To do so, we contemplate human questions: Who are we? How are we living with our values?

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin tells a story about Alfred Nobel, the creator of the Nobel Prize.<sup>4</sup> Nobel earned his fortune through the production of explosives. When Alfred's brother died, a newspaper accidentally ran Alfred's obituary, believing that it was he who had died. And Alfred Nobel was horrified to learn that the newspaper described him as a man who made it possible for *more people* to be killed *more quickly* than anyone else who had ever lived. He realized two things: that the death of innocent people had become his legacy. And that was not how wanted to be remembered. So, he established the Nobel Prize. Today, everyone is familiar with the prize. Relatively few people recall how the Prize's namesake made his fortune. Alfred Nobel saw how he was going to be remembered and decided to change his life in a way that his memory could become a blessing.

Judaism has never emphasized the glory of a perfect, flawless, ideal human being. Rather, our ancestors serve as role models precisely because they are honest about the human condition. Take our ancient ancestor, Joseph, for example. As a kid he was spoiled. He dreamt about his family bowing down and serving him. And he made certain everyone knew it. Through the jealousy of his brothers, deception, slavery, and imprisonment, Joseph's life quickly turned from privileged to abysmal. And the experience forced Joseph towards self-realizations: the world often doesn't conform to our dreams; we are small and insignificant in relation to the larger world. We can choose how we want to live: we can worship the idols of success and wealth or live with our ideals of humility, generosity, patience, compassion, and love.

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<sup>3</sup> This section was influenced by the writings of Rabbi Sharon Brous, 2014 Kol Nidrei Sermon, "[What are you waiting for?](#)"

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, The Book of Jewish Values. Pg 154

Years later, Joseph and his brothers reunited. Joseph gained perspective. Instead of seeking vengeance, he sought forgiveness. Instead of placing blame, he apologized. He rose above youthful self-absorption and saw the world for what it is and what it could still be. The story of Joseph teaches us that personal growth and perspective can emerge from hard experiences and painful truths. We cannot control that the world is unfair. We can, however, control our own role in the decisions of our lives. Regardless of our past, we still have choices to make, today. And until we die, we are very much alive.

In his book, “A Road to Character,” *New York Times* columnist David Brooks explained how deeply good people became..... well..... so good. He contrasted what he called “resume virtues” with “eulogy virtues.” Résumé virtues are the trappings of our outward success – where we went to school, who we know and our network of friends, our jobs and careers, our earning potential and the kinds of things that we own. Brooks says that our culture is obsessed with these resume virtues and we spend the majority of our time cultivating them and encouraging our children to do the same.

Brooks explains that eulogy virtues are what are talked about at our funerals. Imagine hearing your child deliver your eulogy. What would she or he say about you? Were you kind, brave, honest or faithful? Were you capable of loving deeply? Were you willing to sacrifice self in service to others or something greater than yourself?<sup>5</sup> As Brooks illuminates, people who live according to eulogy virtues live with humility, temperance, and deep respect for others.<sup>6</sup> The truth is that we all possess resume virtues and eulogy virtues. It’s not like resume virtues are simply bad and eulogy virtues are better. The real challenge is living with balance. Our culture tends to reinforce resume virtues to the exclusion of eulogy virtues. We often value success and material wealth over the moral and spiritual foundations of our lives.<sup>7</sup> Cultivating a life of eulogy virtues takes practice.

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter, the founder of the *mussar* (self-improvement) movement, said that that it is easier to learn the entire Talmud than to change even one personal character trait. His point is that it is exceedingly difficult to just take some “quiet time,” peer into our inner selves, uncover what’s below the surface and lasting make change. The self-improvement practices of *Mussar* teach us to be cognizant of our daily interactions, the patterns of our deeds. What’s behind or anger or impatience? When have we been generous and understanding and when were we stingy? When have we shown gratitude and appreciation and when have we been silent or self-serving? Are we making empowered choices that are respectful of our physical, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing?

By facing our mortality on Yom Kippur, our spiritual tradition is asking us to have some humility, courage, and vulnerability: to be honest enough with ourselves about our strengths

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<sup>5</sup> David Brooks, *Road to Character*, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, xvi.

<sup>7</sup> Brooks relates to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik’s, [Lonely Man of Faith](#). Soloveitchik uses the story of creation to illustrate that each of us have an Adam I (rational – externally focused) and Adam II (spiritual – inner focused) inside of us. We struggle with balancing the spiritual and the material, the redemptive and empowered.

and weaknesses, our true tendencies and limitations, to consider the balance of resume and eulogy virtues we are emphasizing in our daily lives. It's really hard to do that reflection alone.

In my own life, I've needed help from rabbis and cantors, therapists, teachers, and mentors. I've learned from a parent and in-laws, a personal trainer or a small group of trusted friends. Perhaps this is the wisdom Pirke Avot – the Ethics of our Ancestors: “*Asah l'cha rav, uk'nei l'cha chaver*, acquire for yourself a teacher and a friend, to help with the inner journey. Find an honest and faithful companion...to encourage (us) in difficult situations in life and lend (us) assistance...in times of need.”<sup>8</sup>

The ten days of awe between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are supposed to help us reflect on our lives. But we also need to consider how we are living in the *twelve months* between this Yom Kippur and next Rosh Hashanah. The gates of repentance are closing.

As we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, our work is to live – and to live with *chutzpah* – with audacity. We can commit to living with forgiveness, gratitude, and love. We can build relationships with people that will help support us as we reflect upon our lives. We can humbly embrace the learning that comes from our inner journey. And we can seek to live by the values and virtues that we want the generations of our families and our community to speak about when they write our eulogy. That's what it means to live our lives bound-up in the bonds of life.

May we live lives of meaning and intention, possibility and promise. Gamar Chatimah Tovah – May we be inscribed in the book of life.

*Amen*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Rabbi Erica Asch for sharing her insights on this subject with me. The quotation comes from Kehati Mishna, Pirkei Avot 1:6, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> I extend my deep gratitude to Rabbi Ana Bonnheim, Julia Bonnheim, and Rabbi Dusty Klass for their advice and edits.