

Your One Wild and Precious Life
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Erev Rosh Hashanah 5768 / 2007

After high school I went to Israel for a year with the youth group I grew up in. About six weeks into my program I was in a favorite café one evening in Jerusalem with a friend. We were on our way out the door when we heard popping noises from outside. At first I thought that it was firecrackers but the Israelis in the café knew better. The lights went out and everyone fell to the floor, diving under tables for protection. Instinctively, I ran behind the café's counter where I lay in a tight space next to the waitress. For 30 minutes, I lay on the ground in shock praying to God for my life. At a certain point someone came running into the café and I thought that this was the end of my life. But, instead, it was a soldier instructing us to stay put until he returned with instructions. About 15 minutes later he returned and told us that it was safe for us to leave.

The message of these days is that all of our lives are hanging in the balance. We may not be lying down on the ground with bombs blasting outside--but our future is completely uncertain. Ultimately we have no idea when we will die—and we desperately want to live.

It is hard to honestly confront our mortality. It is terrifying. We want the Israeli soldier, God, anyone, to come running to tell us that everything is going to be ok--that there is nothing to worry about-- that we are going to be healthy, our parents and spouses are going to live long healthy lives, that our kids are going to be ok. We desperately want this assurance-to go to bed with some deep sense

of security about our lives—but, of course, this is ultimately a futile desire--it isn't how life works.

*On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is decided,
how many shall pass on and how many shall be created,
who shall live and who shall die,
who in the fullness of years and who before,
who by fire and who by water,
who by the sword and who by wild beasts,
who by famine and who by drought,
who by earthquake and who by epidemic...*

This chilling text of the *unataneh tokef* prayer which we will pray together tomorrow puts into words with unabashed honesty something that we all know but are often afraid to face—ultimately, our fate is out of our hands. We do not know whether or not we will be here next year to celebrate another Rosh Hashanah with our friends and family.

During a break from college I spent a few weeks living in a Zen Buddhist Monastery. At the end of each day, after a period of silent meditation, we would chant the following words before shutting off to bed.

*Let me respectfully remind you,
Life and death are of supreme importance.
Time passes by swiftly and opportunity is lost.
Each of us should strive to awaken.
Awaken! Take heed, do not squander your life.*

At the time, I found the notion of squandering my life to be a deeply morbid thing to recite right before going to sleep. The pessimistic tone struck me as profoundly un-Jewish. Ours is a tradition that is generally not morose. We tend to emphasize living with simcha (joy) and tend to focus much more on life than on death. People are often surprised when they learn that the *kaddish* prayer that we recite in memory of a deceased relative has absolutely no reference at all of death. Rather, this prayer is an extended list of superlatives which we attribute to our Creator. As Jews, our typical response to death is essentially to affirm life.

And yet, while we are generally discouraged from remaining overly consumed with the inevitability of dying, the high holy days are a time each year when we remind ourselves that in order to truly live—we must appreciate that we are mortal and that life is precious to us. Again and again over the next 10 days we will pray that God *'zochrenu l'chayim, v'kotvenu l'chayim*--that God remember us for life and inscribe us in the book of life.

As I lay there on the ground in Jerusalem 13 years ago crying, desperately praying to God for my life, I had my first taste of my own mortality. I felt in no uncertain terms the transience of being--everything that feels so real and so permanent can be gone in a flash. During these days we are asked to go to that same emotional place. We are challenged to allow ourselves to actually fully feel the precariousness of our lives, and from that place of profound vulnerability we call out to the mysterious Source of Life

with the most primal of our yearnings and to exclaim in the most candid of terms---'let us live!'

Why do the authors of our liturgy try and take us to this very challenging and potentially painful place?

The central spiritual message of the High Holy Days is the renewal of life and the possibility of transformation. The simple but radical assertion which characterizes this season is that human beings and, in turn, communities and the entire world, have the capacity and, in fact, the responsibility, to profoundly transform themselves for the better.

Maimonides teaches:

Do not imagine that character is determined at birth.

We have been given free will.

Any person can become as righteous as Moses or as wicked as Jeroboam.

*We **ourselves** decide whether to make ourselves learned or ignorant, compassionate or cruel, generous or miserly.*

No one forces us, no one drags us along one path or the other.

We ourselves, by our own volition, choose our own way.

When we pray *unetaneh tokef* and acknowledge that some of us may, God forbid, pass away this year, the intention is not for us to dwell on death, rather, the wisdom of confronting our mortality is that it serve as a wake up call towards our transforming our lives.

In Jewish language we are essentially saying what the Buddhists said before going to sleep—

Life and death are of supreme importance.

Time passes by swiftly and opportunity is lost.

We should not squander our lives.

We are meant to be jolted from our complacency and to be moved to ask ourselves the big questions--‘Am I living my life as fully as I can? Am I taking advantage of every precious moment of this brief life?’

The Rabbis and poets who created the High Holiday liturgy had the conviction that we cannot afford to wait until death is at our doorstep to begin to really live--to become fully human.

When we are lying on the ground shielding ourselves from machine gun fire,
or catching our breath after a near car collision, or watching our infant fight for life in the NIC-U, everything petty falls away. All that matters is LIFE.

In the wake of moments like these we are offered a rare perspective--we are shaken, thrown off balance and, as if screamed from the heavens, we hear a voice deep within us which asks—challenges--are we living a life that really matters?!

This is one of those moments. Our being in this room together now is meant to be experienced as the moment after the near-car collision. Over the next 10 days let us take the call of this season seriously. Let us look deeply within and ask ourselves if we are living lives that matter.

Are we living in ways that truly and authentically represent our deepest values? Are we living the lives that God demands of us? Are we living the lives that we demand of ourselves?

I find this to be extremely difficult work. I know that for me personally it is often not self-evident how I am meant to be spending my time on earth or how to go about living a life that matters.

Perhaps one way to engage this soul-searching is to take the time between now and Yom Kippur to really think hard about, and even to commit to writing, what it is that truly matters to us--to put into sharp focus what are our deepest values, convictions and priorities? What would we be proud to be known for? And then, once we have this clarity—the next step is to honestly ask ourselves whether we are acting out these ideals in our day to day lives. Are we walking the walk? If I tell myself that caring for the health of our planet, or fighting poverty or homelessness is one of my two or three greatest concerns in the world—is this consistent with the way I live my life? Does this value shape how I eat and spend money and teach and raise my family? If my partner or children are the single most important priorities in my life—does the amount of time and quality of attention that I offer them reflect this feeling?

These are the kinds of questions which this season of awe begs us to ask of ourselves. These are the conversations that we are meant to have with our loved ones.

And we engage this process with the promise that, after having done this difficult introspective work, that we will emerge after Neilah, the

final service on YK, with a renewed sense of purpose and meaning, having reconnected with our own souls, with our loved ones and with the Source of All Life.

I would like to conclude with a poem by Mary Oliver.

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I **do** know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
**Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?**

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