**We hold these truths to be self evident**

**Occasion:**Yom Kippur-2006

I want to talk to you about some obvious truths. Things we all know but don’t really know or accept.
This past year, my mother died suddenly. My parents were visiting us for the Seders. The morning after the second Seder, my mother was eating matzah and began to choke. Despite all our efforts, she went into cardiac arrest. From that moment on, she was no longer there though she didn’t die until the seventh day of Passover.
What else is there to say?
Obvious truth #1---Life is about experiencing life—meaning that whatever people tell you until you experience it yourself, you haven’t really experienced it. It is a strange thing that so many of the important things in life will be experienced by almost everyone who lives. Growing up, growing older, losing someone you love—these moments happen to most of us. Yet, though people who have experienced these moments try to describe their experiences—it doesn’t really matter, it doesn’t truly sink in until we experience them ourselves.
There are plenty of people who are older than I am who can tell me what it is like as that trusty companion, your body, is no longer as dependable as it once was. There are plenty of people who are younger than I am who I can share my own experience of reaching a certain age. Yet as helpful as that sharing can be---in the end each of us needs to discover for ourselves each aspect of life by experiencing it. The countless number of people who have aged before me can share their wisdom and insights but I will really know only when suddenly I feel betrayed by my body, when this body that has been basically the same since adolescence seems to be that of a different person.
Why did my mother die? The real question of course is not why my mother died, but rather what does it signify, what does it mean? Is there any purpose to life? To her life? To anyone’s life? There are those who would look at my mother’s death—particularly the way she died-- and say that there is no way to understand God’s ways. God works in mysterious ways but that there must have been a reason. Others would say there is no grand purpose that life and death just happen randomly.
I reject both of these answers. It makes no sense to me that a woman who tried to live her whole life within the Jewish tradition would die from eating matzah on Passover. Yet, I refuse to believe that her life, that life itself has no purpose. I refuse to believe in the randomness of the universe, that we live by the inexorable laws of nature, we are born, we live and we die and that is all there is to it. As much as I like the Greek myths as stories, I don’t see the world run by gods who are capricious and arbitrary on the one hand. Nor that we are doomed by the fates on the other. In the myth, despite all his efforts Oedipus cannot escape his predicted fate. While what we do is driven by circumstances, and by our upbringing, I believe we have a measure of choice. In the Talmud, the rabbis’ state that all is foreseen and yet freewill is given --a paradoxical statement about human freewill and God’s omniscience. Perhaps a way to re-construct that teaching is that it is about us and the complexity of our lives. We make choices and yet those choices are influenced and even limited by who we are, the circumstances of our lives and even by our unconscious. In most situations there is neither absolute free choice nor inexorable fate.
I cannot tell you what the purpose of my mother’s life was. Actually I don’t think each of us has a Purpose---the one thing we are supposed to do or be and when it is all over there is someone or being that will say, he fulfilled his purpose or he did not or he did about 65% of what he was supposed to do. It is for me a matter of faith that life has meaning and purpose—life is not just some natural process from conception to death. The challenge of life is not to be on a quest to discover that purpose. We are not heroes searching for the grail or to destroy the one ring by returning it to Mordor.
In a parable by Kafka, a man comes before the law but is stopped by the gatekeeper who won’t let him pass beyond. After years of futile efforts to persuade the doorkeeper to let him past, the man is dying. He asks the gatekeeper one last question. “Everyone strives after the law,” says the man, “so how is it that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?” The gatekeeper answers, “Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I’m going now to close it.”
What does the parable mean? Perhaps he should have forced his way past the gatekeeper? Perhaps it is a teaching about how gatekeepers keep people out as I talked about on Rosh ha-shanah? Perhaps it means that in fact each of us does have a particular purpose that only we can fulfill or fail to fulfill? But today I read the parable to mean that we shouldn’t spend our lives waiting for the door to open, and the truth is there are many gates.
For the second obvious truth is that the purpose of life is the same for each one of us. Just as our story is the same, we are born, we grow up, we grow older, we die, so is our purpose. It is not a secret quest at all. The purpose of every life is to live it. To live it as fully and as consciously as we can. To celebrate its blessings and to struggle with its challenges. It seems an obvious truth but as with most obvious truths we spend much time and energy avoiding it. It is not only Jonah who, when faced with the choices of life, flees to Tarshish. He is afraid of failing. He is afraid of succeeding. He sleeps through the tempest at sea--a perfect metaphor for how we often cope with the challenges of life. We sleep the sleep of depression or addictive behavior or oblivion as we focus our attention elsewhere or spend our time so preoccupied with work that we have no time to think or to feel. Too often, the easy familiar path becomes the pattern of our behavior.
Yes, some times life is too much to be faced. Sometimes we need to sleep. The Talmud says that in the immediate aftermath of death in the period before the funeral, you are free from the obligation of fulfilling certain mitzvot such as putting on tefillin. The language used is meito mutal lifaneiv----when your dead is before you. At moments of extreme loss and sorrow, the tradition understands it is unreasonable to ask you to be present—it could even be said that it would be cruel to have that expectation. How can you praise God in the face of death? You cannot. The time of death is a time of shock, a time of sleep, a time when being present is nearly impossible, when your world has been turned upside down.
But life is not lived in the extremes. It is in the everyday that we need to live in the moment. Yet, we spend so much time living in the past, as Sam Merrin said on Rosh ha-shanah, wishing we were younger, regretting what we did or didn’t do, choices we did or didn’t make.. But the past can not be changed. Or we spend time trying to anticipate the future or having anxiety about it or fantasizing about a better reality. But the obvious truth is we do not know what will happen the next second never mind tomorrow, or this coming year. The only certainty is that minute by minute all of us are coming closer to the end of our story.
Death feels very present to me now. Perhaps this will fade with time. It is a common experience to be aware of life’s fragility after a moment that it has been brought home to you by the death of a loved one or a serious illness We promise ourselves that we will take heed of the warning---live life differently and yet over time it is hard not to fall back in to old familiar patterns---to begin to slumber again.
Now for me death feels like a constant companion. Maybe it is also the stage of my life. For a long time I have thought of my life as a giant woven tapestry made up of all the people I know. Until recently the holes from people who died seemed few and far between. Now in my mind’s eye, the holes seem more numerous; the tapestry is still rich and complex but is beginning to be frayed.
But as deeply connected to my mortality as I feel, I am still alive. What do I mean when I say life is to be lived? What difference does it make how well or how unwisely I live my life? In Deuteronomy, God says I set before you this day life and death, choose life. What does that mean? After all most of us think we are choosing life. I think the text is saying something more. I think it is telling us to choose how to live. I do believe that choosing a life of caring and compassion affects the universe. I do believe that what we do matters amidst the galaxies of the universe. How it matters? How much it matters are both unknowable and not of much interest to me. Like the kabbalists, I believe what we do ripples out into the universe and has consequences far beyond our intentions.
It is complex. Even things done with the best intentions can have a negative effect in the long term. Joseph brings his family down to Egypt to save them from a famine---yet years later that act of mercy also leads to their enslavement. You can only try your best, being modest about what you can accomplish and knowing that your small efforts may also have ultimate significance. The kabbalists talk of God creating the world through Hesed, which is often translated as loving kindness. Yet for Bible scholars hesed in its ancient near eastern context is a treaty term. It connotes a covenantal relationship and responsibility. Often its usage in psalms is translated as faithfully. I think the notion that God created this world with hesed means we are tasked with revealing God’s will in this world. To strive for tikkun olam, to create a world that is more caring, more compassionate, where there is less suffering, where more diseases have cures is for me the hesed—the covenant of caring that we are called to strive to live our lives by.
Judaism is about living life to its fullest and during the High Holidays we are to reflect on that challenge. This is the time of year when I think about time wasted and lost. How much more I could have accomplished, how many more books read, how many paper cuts cut or new craft projects completed, places visited, friends contacted. This is the time of year when I think about myself and the issues that I struggle with, those flaws that are key to who I am and who I am not that are central to me and my life. Is it too late too change? Can I really be different after being this way for so many years?
And then the liturgy reminds me that teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah can avert the severity of the decree. As many have pointed out, it is not the decree itself that can be averted. No amount of dental flossing or exercise or even acts of compassion can prevent my death. It is only the severity of the decree that can be averted. And here severity does not refer to the kind of death. This liturgy is not saying that those who act with loving kindness get to die in their sleep at a ripe old age. It means that either one can live a life of meaning or of slumbering, either of teshuvah, of change, or of avoidance, of self reflection or of the easy road of the same old same old, of deeds of caring and of open handedness or a life of envy and judgment.
This year, I would like to spend more time in teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah and so I am teaching a class focusing on our spiritual life, reflecting on our middot—our personal and ethical qualities and making that striving for growth in our spiritual/emotional lives part of our regular practice. For by teaching the course, I too will be forced to focus on these issues. I want to practice social justice on a weekly basis, even if it is only signing a petition. I want to lay aside judgment. I want to learn to celebrate the joys and the good days and not wait for the perfect ones. For even if today the glass could be just half full, there will also be days when the glass is mostly empty.
On my desk, there is a small Shona sculpture from Africa. It is of a spirit called Chaminuka. The dominant spirit of the Shona, he sees the noble and the base spirit of humankind, yet passes no judgment. One eye is always depicted as higher to portray the Chaminuka’s ability to perceive the different levels of human nature. However, his mouth and nose are always expressionless since Chaminuka casts no judgment over the actions of humankind. Striving to be non-judgmental doesn’t mean nothing matters that everything is the same in the context of a vast and infinite universe. What we do matters. What others do also matters, but that is not the same as being judgmental of it.
I have tried to say to you these last few years that Judaism isn’t about the Jewishly Jewish things such as observing Shabbat or keeping kosher; perhaps a better way to put it is to say that Judaism is about life. It is not about preserving a past. It is not about serving God. It is not about continuity. It is about living a life infused by the teachings and practices of Judaism and experiencing that life as improved, enlightened or even inspired by Judaism. Breathing comes naturally. Everything else in life needs to be learned. Judaism is the textbook of the Jewish people about how to be alive. A textbook that is constantly changing in an unfolding world of hesed.
Each of us is given a choice. You can be Jonah who sleeps through life or a Job who struggles with life’s challenges, will not settle for the easy platitudinal answers of friends, but will find his way through the whirlwind. You can be Abraham understanding that life is always a journey to a place that God will show you meaning an unknown future or you can be the desert generation always longing for a wonderful past even if that past was being slaves in Egypt.
Who will strive to go forth and who will remain mired in the familiar?
Who will mark time and who will make their days count?
As the poet Mary Oliver asks,
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?
There is one final obvious truth that comes from my period of mourning the death of my mother. For years, I have attended Shivas for congregants. When asked I talk about the purpose of Shiva as creating time for mourners to sit with their grief and loss. Yet, I also pointed out that Shiva is a time for friends and community to share this moment with the mourners. Therefore, I encourage people to consider sitting Shiva even for just an evening because it allows friends to be with you. This is both because it can be healing and helpful even if you didn’t think it was necessary and because it can be helpful to the people who knew the deceased.
There was a person at my old synagogue who was elderly, without immediate family and who had also been incredibly generous to the synagogue. We found out about his death three weeks after it happened. I liked Harold and felt robbed of the opportunity to say goodbye at his funeral. I wanted to be there not to say thank you for his generosity or to represent the synagogue. It was simply because I wanted to have a moment of mourning.
Yet, again talking to others about Shiva and the actual experience of Shiva were different. I was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support and concern. Let me now publicly thank each of you who sent a card, who made a donation, who came to Shiva, who said something when they saw me, who helped arrange for things. I want to thank those who thought about doing one of those things even if they didn’t manage to. The thought counts as well. It’s actually difficult to tell you how much it all meant to me.
Rabbis are strange creatures. We live in a community but are different than everybody else in the community. I am your rabbi and whatever other relationship I have with you, I remain your rabbi. I am both in the community and standing apart. Sometimes I think one of the reasons I decided to become a rabbi was it allowed me to be in relationship with people (not an easy thing for me) and yet to be at a distance. When I was thinking of becoming a rabbi, my alternate fantasy profession was rock star which upon reflection is the same thing as a rabbi--in relationship to lots of people but at a clear distance. It was a challenge and an opportunity for me to be a rabbi and a mourner. I decided not to speak at my mother’s funeral so I could be a mourner not rabbi. I needed to be willing to reverse roles, to be vulnerable during Shiva; to be taken care of by people who at every other time it is my job to care for. As you may have noticed, when I lead mourner’s Kaddish, I step away from the bimah to make a distinction between leading the congregation in Kaddish and my saying Kaddish as a mourner for my mother.
And there it was, amidst the loss, the overwhelming nature of the experience on every level, the unreality of it all, there was community in action as people came non-stop (literally) to sit Shiva with me, just to be present. It didn’t matter than some people didn’t get a chance to talk with me because of the crowds---just being there was important for me and therefore for each of you. Community is a precious piece of life. Maybe Americans like bowling alone, but if that is true one place that Judaism swims upstream against the culture of America is its stress on community. Yet, like the inner work I spoke about a moment ago, community requires work and attention. It can bring us comfort and context not just at moments of great loss but moments of celebration as well. This summer my eldest child Kayla got married. Well actually she and her husband Stefan had a Jewish commitment ceremony because they don’t believe in marriage, heterosexual privilege and all that. It was the happiest day of my life. The joy and love of the two of them; the joy and love of their friends---it was a time to rejoice despite what had happened only months before.
So maybe that is one more obvious truth--We should celebrate every simcha that we can. As adults many of us make light of birthdays—yet what bigger simcha is there. I really want to encourage you to come to synagogue at every moment you have a chance to celebrate. Graduations, retirement, promotions, birthdays, anniversaries, a special accomplishment, the end of chemotherapy, a moment of gratitude, getting a driver’s license, completing a project, finding a job, seeing a rainbow. Come join your community and take an aliya. Treasure the moment and let us treasure it with you.
And it is not just the simchas; it is the pleasures of life. The Talmud says: When you get to heaven, it was taught in the name of Rav that you will have to give reckoning and account for everything that your eye saw and did not eat (TJ Kid.4:9 66d).
Or: it is told that when Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, one of the great rabbinic leaders of Germany in the 19th century was in frail health toward the end of his life, he decided to go on vacation in the Swiss Alps. This seemed like a somewhat strange and impulsive thing for such an eminent rabbi to do. So his students asked him – why are you making this trip? His response was: I have this feeling that after I die, and I am called in before God, I'm sure one of the questions that God will ask me is: So nu, Shimshon – you lived so close … did you ever get a chance to see my Alps?
It has been a long year and I think I am still reaching new layers of experience of it. It still feels unreal that my mother will not walk through that door or any other door for that matter. Everything seems out of place. There is a traditional custom during the period of mourning. If you have a makom kavua—a regular seat in the synagogue, you don’t sit in it. Literally, you too are out of place. I actually have a regular seat in the sanctuary and you may have noticed I try to not sit there during this year of mourning.
Yet, this year has taught me the answer to what is it all about? What was the purpose of my mother’s life or any life? It is to help the continued unfolding of God’s hesed---to bring us that much closer to a world of compassion and peace. To live our lives fully. Seeing our life work as not about success or material acquisitions, but the acquiring of a good heart, and being successful in helping heal the wounds of those in our lives.
The Talmud gives us its own specific list of questions that God will ask you when you get to heaven:
Were you honest in your business dealings?
Did you fix times for Torah?
Were you involved with your family?
Did you hope for the redemption?
Did you seek out wisdom?
And finally – did you have an awareness of God – of something beyond yourself in the universe? (Tractate Shabbat 31A)
The list is interesting because once again it does not ask about the rituals of Judaism but the values the rituals are to remind us of. It also does not ask about your accomplishments---what degrees did you get; how successful were you in your work, were you a great parent? Rather it asks: Were you engaged in study? Were you ethical in your work? Were you engaged with people? Did you not give up hope for a better world? Did you understand your existence as part of the universe? Did you understand that you can make a difference?
For the most obvious of the obvious truths is death is all around us, but we gather at Shiva because that is what humans can do it the face of our mortality –huddle together –bringing the warmth of ourselves to the mourner. There is no myth of Prometheus in the Jewish tradition. No one needs to steal fire to bring to humanity. We carry the fire of our humanity with us and we warm each other and give light to each other keeping the surrounding darkness at bay. Against the darkness all we can do is hold hands and the truth is that is more than enough.
Thank you and Shana Tova.
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