

**We are the stories we tell ourselves:**  
**What story do we want to become?**

Shanah Tovah!

I want to begin our learning together this morning with a simple question. How do you want to be remembered? What is the legacy that you want to leave behind? What mark or lasting influence do you want to leave on the world when it's your time? How do you want to be remembered? A simple question without an easily accessible answer. Why isn't the answer easy? Because it's so personal, so subjective, so close to the ultimate question of the universe and everything that it is difficult to do the question justice with mere words. Sure, there are concrete things we wish to leave behind -- financial security for our loved ones, for one, but how do we articulate the principles of a life well lived? How do we ensure that the values that we want to pass on to our loved ones and friends will be what they inherit?

Now some of you might be thinking -- Rabbi, you're young, why are you thinking about all of these heavy questions? Let's hear a nice sermon about the parasha, the themes of the holidays or something else entirely --

just not this morbid topic! Here's the thing: Yes, I'm young, but I'm also human. And to be human is to live with the fragility of our own existence. We are all here but for the grace of God. Heaven forbid (ptoo ptoo ptoo) that anything should happen to any one of us -- and yet our high holiday liturgy reminds of the limits of our own mortality by asking "Who shall live and who shall die." But I still didn't answer your question -- Why am I thinking about these heavy issues? Well, as a young father, I can't help but wonder what lessons my son will take from the way I live my life. As a husband, I can't help but think should the unthinkable occur, how will Michelle think of our time together? As a young professional just this side of the beginning of his career, how will you, my congregants and community remember my time in this community, my time in your lives?

These heavy, important issues resonate well with the themes of the yammim noraim, the high holiday season. During this time of year, we are supposed to take an accounting of our actions -- we are supposed to devote time to engage in the difficult spiritual work of personal awareness and growth. And, I cannot help but find these themes present in one of the most difficult parts of our High Holiday liturgy -- the Unetaneh Tokef. During the

hazzan's repetition of the amidah, we recite the Unetaneh Tokef, a medieval piyyut (liturgical poem), of unknown authorship. What we do know is that thematically, it assumes that on some fundamental level each of us could fail to be inscribed in the book of life for the coming year. It assumes that some of us won't be around for next Rosh Hashanah -- it assumes that, for some of us, our legacy will be left sooner rather than later. The most famous section of the poem asks the un-askable -- (Mi Yichiyeh, U'Mi Yamoot) "Who will live and who will die?" -- Mi BaEysh, Mi BaMayyim? (Who by fire and who by water?).

A word on the morbidity of the text -- yes, it asks us to confront the mortality of the human condition. Yes, this prayer forces us to imagine that, come next Rosh Hashanah, the makeup of the people in this very room will be different. Some of us won't be here. Some of us will, and what's more there are people who don't know yet that they will be here next year. This seemingly gruesome list of ways people could perish that we find in the middle of the U'netaneh tokef, is here to remind us that while we each get to tell our own story, we don't usually get to dictate our end.

Ultimately, that's what the anxieties we began with are all about. We, as human beings, as breathing, thinking, feeling creatures have the capacity to shape the world around us in so many incredible ways and yet... none of us are able to control how our stories will end or how we will be remembered. So now what? What are we to do to ensure that we leave a positive, or at least intentional, legacy?

How do we write the story of our lives in such a way that we are remembered for our values and contributions? How are we to ensure that we are remembered? When thinking about these heavy, heavy issues there is one place in our tradition that we can find wisdom appropriate to the question at hand. Kohelet, The book of Ecclesiastes teaches us that

<p>קֹהֶלֶת ט"ו: כָּל אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכֹחֲךָ, עֲשֵׂה</p>	<p>Ecclesiastes 9:10 Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might.</p>
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Hmm... in a move similar to the Nike brand slogan of “Just Do It.” Our tradition comes to teach us that we, that I, might be overthinking the problem. The issue isn't a matter of what we will leave behind inasmuch as it is what we do with the time that we have here and now. As we read in Unetaneh Tokef -- it is our soul's turn to parade before God, k'vnei marom,

like sheep on Rosh HaShanah to be judged, we can only be judged meritoriously as we have spent all of our power and might, doing the right thing in the here and now. We can't control how we might be remembered in the future. Maybe all of this focus on how to ensure our legacies is an utter waste of time... maybe Judaism is less of a backward facing religion and more of a present-facing tradition...

Huh?!? That doesn't ring true -- Judaism is as much a history-facing tradition as any other... if not more! Just look at what the Talmud and Haggadah say regarding how we are supposed to celebrate Passover:

פסחים קט"ז ב:ג'-ד'	Pesachim 116b:3-4
<p><b>בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים</b> שנאמר (שמות יג, ח) והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה יקוק לי בצאתי ממצרים לפיכך אנחנו חייבים להודות להלל לשבח לפאר לרומם להדר לברך לעלה ולקלס למי שעשה לאבותינו ולנו את כל הנסים האלו הוציאנו מעבדות לחרות מיגון לשמחה ומאבל ליום טוב ומאפלה לאור גדול ומשעבוד לגאולה ונאמר לפניו הללויה...</p>	<p><b>In each and every generation one is obligated to see themselves as if they went out from Egypt</b>, as it says (Exodus 13:8) And you shall tell you child on that day, saying: Because of this, YHVH did for me when I went out from Egypt. Therefore, we are obligated to offer effusive, beautiful praise and thanksgiving to the One who performed all these miracles for our ancestors and for us: God brought us from servitude to freedom, from grief to joy, from mourning to festivity, from darkness to great light, and from subjugation to redemption; and let us</p>

	say before Him "Halleluyah!"
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We are told to not just tell the stories of our ancestors, we are commanded by our tradition to go beyond simply recounting -- we are obligated (hayyav) to place ourselves into the narratives we tell. Instead of simply learning about our national history, we are expected to live it. Judaism teaches us to inhabit the narratives of our past, not just the present. We are instructed to own these often painful narratives not just to learn the factual religious truth, but to also feel it in our kishkes. What's more, we do dramatic reenactments of important moments in our peoples' narrative as part of our liturgy. The verses we sing and the pomp and circumstance we use when taking out the Torah for example are meant to bring us back to the moment of revelation, to the moment when we first received the Torah. In short, Judaism teaches us that simply retelling our stories is not enough, we are to become the stories we tell about ourselves.

And here's the thing, Judaism is well aware of the fact that we are actually the stories we tell about ourselves. Storytelling is so central to our tradition that it is baked right into our liturgy. Jewish practice seems to be telling us that in order to cement identity, in order to understand where you

are now, you have to first understand where you come from. Judaism takes the view that the present is inescapably informed by the past. What's more, regardless if we live our lives divorced from the narratives of the Jewish people, we will inevitably create narratives that help us explain our present. That is to say, we are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves regardless of what Judaism says -- so why not buy in wholesale to the Jewish identity project? Ultimately -- we live our lives as self-fulfilling prophecies. If we say that some task or goal is beyond our capacity, then there is no way that we will allow ourselves to even engage in the work necessary to fulfill said task. We, not God, not the Universe, not even our parents, have the ability to limit our potential. That distinct pleasure lies deep within each of us... no one limits us more than we do ourselves.

Which brings us back to the questions we began with -- how can we ensure that we leave at least a positive legacy once we leave this plane of existence? And yet, as we have established that might be a question that leads us down a path of futile intellectual pursuit. It might be the wrong question entirely. It is too focused on the uncontrollable, and not focused enough on what we can control -- the stories we tell ourselves about

ourselves. It is focused on how others might see us one day, hopefully, and not on how we came to be in this place at this moment, with these people. It focuses too much on “what if?”, and not enough on “now what?” That’s what makes Judaism fundamentally different from so many religions in today’s world. We are taught to focus not on the *what if*, rather on the, *now what*. While many other spiritual traditions emphasize abstract faith, Judaism’s focus is on completing concrete actions, on performing mitzvot in this world, in the now. These 613 concrete actions, these 613 mitzvot come to teach us that the only thing we can affect in the slightest is the way that we choose to go through this world. (And, from personal experience, most of us can say that we aren’t even all that good at controlling ourselves most of the time.)

So what actions are we supposed to take? What concrete steps are we told to make to positively impact our legacies in both the present and future?? How do we shift our own personal narratives? Again, I turn our attention to words taken from the Unetaneh Tokef --

<p>וּתְשׁוּבָה וּתְפִלָּה וְצִדְקָה מַעֲבִירִין אֶת רוּעַ הַגְּזֵרָה:</p>	<p>But t’shuvah, and tefillah and tzedakah Annul any negative decree...</p>
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Through these three positive actions --- T'shuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah, we are able to somehow redefine Divine mandate. Let's break them down, shall we? By doing t'shuvah -- by doing the serious work that we are called to this time of year... by soul searching... by taking an accounting of our decisions, we are better able to see what steps we ought to take to become a better version of ourselves. T'shuvah, return, gives us the opportunity to choose to do better next time. To choose to live by ideals and values, and not be ruled by our passions or past mistakes.

That brings us to Tefillah. Tefillah -- which is normally understood as prayer, is also a deeply introspective practice, according to Judaism. The verb "to pray" - *Lehitpalel* - is reflexive in the Hebrew, denoting some sort of deeply personal process. Ultimately the act of praying is also a deeply communal one in Judaism. Prayer is best conducted in the larger context of a minyan -- as part of a larger whole, and chiefly serves (pardon my bluntness) as a means for social gatherings. There is rarely a Jewish service without schmoozing during davvening, torah reading and even while the sermon... ahem... takes place. It's ok. It's not a flaw in the Jewish religious system -- it's a feature (perk?) . Communal prayer brings our people together and

allows us to not only dramatically reenact important moments in our people's history but also to **be a people**, to connect to our fellows, to ourselves and hopefully to God.

Finally -- Tzedakah -- the act of thinking outside of the community itself. No Jewish practice or theological exploration would be complete without understanding that our tradition understands that we have a primal need to help others. What's more -- we have a moral obligation to make the world a better place than we found it. That is a hard pill to swallow in today's world. So many of the stories we tell ourselves focus on limiting what we can and cannot do. We ask ourselves, how can my small contribution, whether it be time or money, actually make a difference in the world around me? It is easy to lose hope, it is easy to fall prey to self imposed limits. I encourage us all today to engage in the work of asking ourselves what is the story we wish we could tell? What are the barriers that each of us have built (some with good reason) that actually limit our potential to be forces for hesed, for God's love, in the world? How can we each live this Jewish value to its and our full potential? What is the story we want to

tell? What is the story we want others to tell about us? Are we living our lives in sync with the values we want to leave as our legacy?

The words of Ecclesiastes ring truer in this moment for me than they have ever before --

קהלת ט"י כָּל אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יָדְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּכֹחְךָ, עֲשֵׂה	Ecclesiastes 9:10 Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might.
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It is in our power to take action to (as Gandhi put it) Be the change we want to see in the world. It is in our power to right wrongs, to help others, to work towards building a world of justice, truth, fairness and love. And while we take action, while we shift the global narrative, we also have the capacity to shift, change, and transform our stories as well. The great tennis player Arthur Ashe once said, *Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.*

As we find ourselves, here and now surrounded and supported by the strength of this holy community, we recognize that - legacy is very much our minds. Not necessarily our own legacies, but those of our loved ones. How do we ensure that we correctly recount the narratives of departed family and friends? What's more -- what do we do if their legacies are more than black

or white? What if our loved ones have left a complicated narrative for us to tell or recount?

These all too real questions lie at the heart of our Yizkor service. We gather a few times of the year as a community to remember together each of our loved ones, their lives, and our losses. We do this because the act of remembering can be deeply painful. We do this to remind ourselves that it is through the power of community that we are able to weather the trials and losses that life brings. We do this to borrow strength from the greater Jewish people as we reincorporate loss into our personal narratives. Yizkor brings us together as a people, not because we are all remembering the same way, but because we all need one another's strength to do the work of remembering. Lest we think that remembering our lost loved ones is nothing but pain: it is good to remember and to celebrate the good moments we had. Coming together as a community affords us the opportunity to mourn AND the opportunity to share the ways that our loved ones positively impacted (and continue to impact) our lives.

In a very real way, yizkor forces us to deal with the questions of legacy and values lived. It reminds us of the importance of remembering those who

came before us, who entrusted their legacies with us to retell. It reminds us to be grateful for the people who might remember us when we are gone. It forces us to learn the value of recalling our personal narratives while simultaneously incorporating them into the larger narrative of the Jewish people. It reminds us that our smaller, particular stories are the threads that make up the tapestry of the lived Jewish experience. That is to say that our stories and the stories of our loved ones matter and continue to push ever forward the story of the Jewish people. Our collective legacy is Am Yisrael -- Clal Yisrael -- it is our opportunity to make real the Jewish values that we have inherited from our loved ones.

So my bracha for all of us as we enter into a new decade... 5780: we all merit the possibility of taking the actions needed to make our lives a blessing, to make the lives of the people around us a blessing, and to hopefully work towards making the whole world a blessing. CHOOSE 3 THINGS

AND LET US SAY AMEN.

**Shanah tovah u'metukah. G'MAR HATIMA TOVAH**