

Kol Nidre
2016
Ethical Wills

This year we celebrated a couple of important milestones: The 100th anniversary of the end of WWI Battle of Belleu Wood. The opening of our new national museum of African American history, and in a few short months, we'll celebrate the 75th anniversary of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. But of all the milestones we observed this year, one stands head and shoulders above all others. Does anyone know what it is?

This year we celebrate the 50th anniversary of premier of the first episode of Star Trek...that's right, I am trekkie!.

50 years ago we were introudced to Capt Kirk, Mr. Spoke, Lt Ohura, Mr. Zulu and Mrs. Chekoff. I hope you understand that I could easily spend the rest of Yom Kippur speaking about Star Trek, and tempted as I may be, I won't. But I will focus on one small part of this life altering series.... the opening...tell me if these words sound familiar:

**"Space... The final frontier...
These are the voyages of the
Starship Enterprise.
Its continuing mission:
To explore strange new worlds...
To seek out new life; new**

civilizations...
To boldly go where no one (man) has
gone before! "

That opening, riveting as it is, actually is our theme for this evening! Do I have your attention yet?

On Rosh Hashana, but a short week ago, I asked those who attended the service in the Social Hall (or as I like to call it, those who chose to fly first class...) to look at their lives and see what changes they could make during this upcoming year to become better people and better Jews. I am certain that in one way or another Rabbi Raskin asked you to do the same...to explore what changes you could make during this upcoming year to become better people, better Jews.

How did you all do? Did you find it a meaningful exercise?

I actually took my own advice and on a flight I took this last week, I stared out the window as we crossed this great nation and took a long hard look at my life. I, like you, found many things I could have done different. I reflected on decision I made incorrectly and tried to do a true Heshbon

HaNefesh, a true and deep introspection. I looked back at this last year, and found some incredible highs and some lows. Tonight, I want to share with you, what I consider has been the darkest day of my life.

Many of you know that I recently retired from the Navy.

In 2002, I had the honor of deploying to Iraq as rabbi for the First Marine Expeditionary Force. It was in Kuwait, but a few weeks before the war started that I had to do the hardest thing I have ever done in my entire life. I can remember it like it was yesterday. It was a hot day in the desert, and, as I had advised my marines to do, I forced myself to sit down and write a letter to my wife and each of my children to be delivered to them...in case something happened to me.

In a few pages, I had to sum up all of my feelings towards them, but more important, I wanted to put in writing, all the things I wanted them to know, all the things I felt would be important for them to know about life, about God, about me. I must have spent hours on each letter writing this “ethical will”. It was truly a humbling and religious exercise that I encourage all of you to do at some point in your lives.

I have been blessed not to have had these letter delivered and almost cried when the person I entrusted them to returned them to me upon my homecoming.

Well, on this flight cross-country, as I reflected on that horrible, hard, day, I realized the power of such an event. Power of which still remained with me last week as I flew at 7500 ft above the Pennsylvania country-side. As I slipped the surly bonds of earth, I reflected on a question similar to that which I asked myself that day in the sand of Kuwait:

If I were gone today, what would I want my family to know?

And as I thought about Yom Kippur, I also realized that there was so much that I wanted and needed to tell not only my family, but I also realized that there was a lot that I wanted to tell **you, this magnificent warm and caring congregation.**

And so, as I landed, I promised myself that I would not wait any longer, and that instead of writing a letter to you, I would spend some time on THIS Yom Kippur “**boldly going where no one had gone before**”, going not into outer space, but into inner space, going into the very soul of what I as a rabbi, as a fellow congregant and as a fellow jew want each of you to know:

Tonight, I want to share with you my ethical will. Tonight I want to you to know what I think is important for you to know about life, about God, and about Judaism.

Are you ready? Here we go.....

My ethical will to you is really quite simple, it contains only 5 things:

Number One: I want you to know that God is “avinu malkenu”, our father and our king.

(I want to apologize for the male centric language that I use, it simply reflects the hebrew language of our mahzor.)

God is Avinu and Malkenu: At first this may seem as a simplistic statement, but it is perhaps one of the most profound and important statements of our faith. God has to be seen and is both, our Father and our King. God commands, God punishes, God humbles, but God comforts, and God praises, God gives strength to the weary. As you look back at the past year, and you take an honest, profound look at your life, you will see that God was there in one of his many attributes. A wise man put it this way, he said, “You know, every day of our lives, God gives us, not what we **want**, but what we need.”

Sometimes as Malkenu, as our king, handing our harsh decrees of life and death. And, as his subjects, we get angry at Him, and we ignore Him, and we feel distant from Him. And sometimes, he gives us what we need as Avinu, as our Father, and we are comforted by him, we learn from Him and his Torah, and we receive guidance and counsel from His words.

My friends, I need for you to understand that that God, is both Avinu our Father and Malkenu, our King.

The second thing I want you to know is this:

Prayer works- plain and simple- PRAYER WORKS!

Well, actually there is a small caveat to this and that prayer works as long as you are praying for the right things.

Story of Rabbi going hunting

Please Lord, let this bear be Jewish

Bear stops puts on yarmulka and says For what I'm about to receive let me be truly grateful; baruck ataHamotzi....

Prayer works.... if you pray for the right things.

As a matter of fact, Prayer, by far, is one of the most misunderstood concepts in Judaism. We often think of prayer as something going outward, we pray to God for something, we say something and we want something

back. But in our faith prayer is so much more. There is a discussion amongst the rabbis as to the root of the word Tefila, which is the word for prayer in Hebrew. Some say that the word tefilah comes from the reflexive verb L'hitpalel, which means to judge one's self. We cannot approach God if we do not first take a hard look at ourselves and examine what it is exactly what we are asking for. Do we really need it? Why do we need it? For what purpose? I can pray to the Almighty for that bright red Porsche 925 turbo, but is that really prayer?

Another group of scholars says that the word tefilah comes from the word Tofel, which means to unite or to bond. Prayer is not asking God, but bonding with God, becoming one with God. Prayer is letting your soul be reunited with God.

Prayer works because in true prayer, we do not expect anything except understanding one's self and allowing ourselves to get closer to the Almighty. Some say it's a cop-out, but I'll say it anyhow:

If you don't get what you pray for, then you are not praying for the right things.

My friends, I want you to know that prayer works.

Three and Four actually go together.

#4, I want you to know that **there is such a thing as SIN...**

and #5, I also want you to know that **there such a thing as Teshuva, repentance.**

Sin is a word that we Jews don't use a lot. As a matter of fact, aside from this season of the year, and the occasional encounter with TV evangelists while channel surfing, most of us just don't seem to have much use for the word or concept 'sin' in our daily lives. Jewish mothers use the occasional phrase like, "It would be a sin to let that food go to waste." But we really mean it would be a shame.

Sin is a hard word for many of us American Jews. The English word itself feels so strongly infused with Christian definition that it is almost easier to deny that Jews have a concept of sin. But this is just too important to deny or ignore. Whether we like it or not, Judaism does have a strong and healthy concept of sin. Sin is more than a mere failing, misdeed, or missed mark. **Sin is not doing the will of God.**

So why are so many of us so unfamiliar and unaccustomed to using the word SIN? I think this is in part because we have ritually confined sin to Ten Days in the Fall, and the recitation of the High Holy Days prayers when in fact, sin is something we face every single day. So how do we know what is a sin

and what isn't? It's simple, God has already told us and it's written right here in the Torah.

I know, I know that there is a lot of controversy as to what is prohibited in the Torah, but I like what one of my favorite rabbis in Seminary used to say. He would say that there are many grey areas in the torah, but there are also a lot of black and white areas. In an age of moral relativism, let us be honest with ourselves, there are things that are right and those that are wrong. My friends, **I want you to know that there is such a thing as sin.**

Next, I want you to know that just as there is sin, there is such a thing as Teshuva, perhaps one of the most wonderful gifts given to us by God.

Teshuva, repentance and forgiveness, much like prayer, has more to do with us than with God. Teshuva is learning from our mistakes, Teshuva is being given a second change.

Favorite movie, City Slickers-

Favorite scene- reminiscing about childhood

Ball went into neighbors yard- call a "do-over"

How sad that this beautiful concept we learned as kids is soon forgotten as adults.

Teshuva let's us have a do-over in our lives, in our relationships and in our faith.

My friends, there is such a thing as teshuva and we can start right here, right now.

And finally, I want you to know that **Judaism helps**.

I can't tell you how much it pains me to hear people describe religious observance as a burden. Sure, it's hard to be Jewish. There is an awful lot that we have to do, and say, every single day. But the wonderful commandments and customs and beliefs make our life not harder, but more fulfilling, more rich and certainly more peaceful

Judaism takes the awkwardness out of every day life. Judaism gives us words, when we are speechless, it gives us things to do, when we do not know where or how to turn, and Judaism crystallizes our inner more feelings of awe for God.

When we are mourning, Judaism gives us the kaddish

When we are joyous, Judaism gives us the blessing shehehiyanu

And when we are awed by our insignificantness in the universe, Judaism reminds us that we were created, but a little lower than the angels. My friends, Judaism works!

That is it, five simple things I wanted you to know:

My hope and prayer is that on this day of Attonement, we:

-turn our hearts and minds to recognize the Almighty as our Father and our

King

-we pray for the right things, and through it change and grow

- we commit ourselves to do away with sin in our lives

- we avail ourselves of the opportunity to do Teshuva, a do-over in our lives

- and that we pledge, now, here, tonight, make Judaism work in our lives.

Amen