

**How will you name yourself? How will others?**

Yom Kippur 5778

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Jeff Rubin's remarks this morning reminded me of a story I once heard about a rabbi and a synagogue president. During his first service leading the community, the new rabbi noticed a certain congregant walk over to the shul president and demand rather loudly that the air conditioning be turned down because it was too cold in the sanctuary.

The president nodded kindly and took care of it.

Just a few prayers later, the same congregant asked the president to have the air conditioning turned up because now it was too hot.

Not long after, it was too cold for the congregant, and then too hot, and this went on all morning long.

The president always nodded kindly and took care of it.

After services, the new rabbi said to the president, "I was so impressed with your patience in handling that congregant who kept complaining about the air conditioner."

"It was no big deal," said the president. "We don't even have an air conditioner."

I know for a fact that some of you think it's either too hot or too cold in here. I know that when you speak to Jeff Rubin he'll be very, very patient with all of you!

*L'shana Tova* everyone, a happy and healthy new year to you. It's so wonderful to be together, and to share our hopes and prayers as we enter the new year of 5778 together. If feel so blessed to be entering my seventh year as rabbi of this congregation! You know seven is an especially sacred number in Judaism, and I look forward to all of the blessings that this seventh year together will bring.

These holidays always fill me with such optimism and hope. Nearly every page of the mahzor reinforces those feelings: *Chadeish aleinu shana tova...* Grant us renewal in the new year ... *tein tikvah le'dorsheicha...* restore hope to all those who seek you. The themes of forgiveness and a fresh start are just so liberating. Rabbi Akiva once said: *Ashreichem Yisrael*, Hey Jews, be happy [I'm paraphrasing of course], you are so fortunate to have this gift of Yom Kippur to purify you, to renew you! But as the great 19<sup>th</sup> century Chassidic master Rabbi Zvi Elimelech of Dinov said, *t'shuvah* is only effective if you believe in it. Today only works if you have faith in the power of Yom Kippur to change the course of your life. I happen to know a lot of people who can't quite get their head around the potential of Yom Kippur. Who may be sitting here today in shul, who may be fasting, and wearing non-leather shoes, and reciting all the words in the mahzor, beating their chests at all the right times, but who aren't all that convinced that real change in their lives is possible. They are carrying around hurt and resentment from the past; they stuck in self-defeat because of a bad decision they once made, a broken relationship, a loss they haven't come to terms with, or even something they themselves had no control over whatsoever, but that still exercises tremendous power over their lives.

A few years ago, we were in Montreal visiting Sari's extended family. We were at a party with my in-laws and many of their old friends from childhood. Now you have to understand something about being a rabbi. I don't know if this happens to say, accountants—that everywhere you go people ask you questions about their taxes; or if at parties people ask dentists can you just take a look at my molar? Got a little pain back there... But when you're a rabbi, you're always on, you're always a rabbi! So, some of the people at this party asked me to speak to one of their old friends, to kind of have an intervention with a man who had lost his wife a year earlier. You see, they were genuinely concerned about their friend, because he went to the cemetery every single day for an entire year, and he was still going. They thought that wasn't normal, and wanted me to use my rabbinic authority to tell him this was not proper. I sat and talked with the man for a long time while everyone else ate party sandwiches and brownie bites. And the truth is, he couldn't see his way out of his mourning. His whole life was consumed with going back and forth to the cemetery and sitting there for hours beside his late wife's grave. I tried to gently suggest that he begin to remember her in other ways and in different places. That she would want him to live fully and with joy, not in a state of perpetual grief. But he didn't want to hear that. Even now, this man still spends his days in the cemetery.

The great Viennese psychotherapist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl said: “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.” That is the power of *t’shuvah*, right. I wish I could redo every conversation when I said something I now wish I hadn’t. I wish I could relive every day in my life when I made the wrong choice, or caused someone else to be hurt, disappointed or angry. But I can’t! What I am left with is the challenge to change myself, so that I don’t repeat those behaviors in the future.

But there are also parts of our life stories that we never had any control over. Can I do *t’shuva* for someone else’s sins? Can I be responsible for the mistakes that other people made? Well the Torah certainly thought so. A little while ago we all sang a rousing rendition of *Adonai, Adonai El Rachum ve’chanun...* Those lines in the mahzor actually come from the Book of Exodus.<sup>1</sup> God decides to revealing some of His essence, His attributes to Moses. In our mahzor the portion ends with, *nosei avon va’fesha ve’chata-ah ve’nakeh*. That God is loving and faithful and forgives iniquity and transgression and sin, and grants pardon. Beautiful! Totally goes along with all of the themes of the high holiday season. But the source of that prayer, the verse in Exodus doesn’t end there! It goes on to say *pokeid avon avot al banim*—that God will punish children for the sins of their parents. *Ad ribei-im...* Even four generations down the line we could still be punished for the sins of our ancestors! I don’t know about you, but I never knew my great, great grandparents, and yet I’m going to be punished for a decision they made 100 years ago somewhere between Minsk and Pinsk! That seems really unfair. I think the Torah was trying to impress upon the Jewish people the ripple effect of our actions on others in a particularly extreme way. However, 700 years after Exodus the prophet Ezekiel<sup>2</sup> came along and overturns what the Torah said! Ezekiel said, No More! From now on, *ben lo yisa be’avon ha’av*, children do not inherit their parents’ faults, their parents’ failures, their parents’ sins. Sin is no longer congenital! This was a very liberating, life-changing lesson for me.

As I have told you before, my parents divorced when I was a just a child. I was three years old when my father moved out, and to tell you the truth I have no recollection, no memory of my parents ever actually being married. When my beloved grandmother died just a few months ago, I discovered some old pictures and photo albums from when I was a baby...and lo and behold

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 32:10

<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 18:20

there they are, my Mom and Dad and I all in the same picture. The truth is, I can't remember them being married, and blessedly, I can't remember any fights or disagreements that led to their divorce either. Those first few years of my life are a total blur. But I'll tell you what I have thought a lot about over the years; what plagued me through my childhood and all the way into adulthood. As the product of parents whose marriage didn't make it, I wondered if I would be ever be able to be a successful spouse someday. I didn't really have a lot of exposure to an intact, healthy marriage growing up...what would I know about how to create that myself? And since I hardly saw my father, I wondered whether I would have what it takes to be a decent father if I was ever blessed with children. Was I doomed to repeat what happened before me? Was divorce a part of my genetic code? Would I be punished for the sins of my parents?

Well, Sari and I just celebrated our 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary a couple of weeks ago, and we have three really awesome kids. Now I'm sure Sari could tell you many reasons why I'm a less than perfect husband, and please don't ask my kids...two out of three are teenagers, which means I can hardly do anything right! But seriously, I could have gone through my whole life thinking I wasn't capable of being a good husband or father; that I was damaged goods. That any attempt at marriage or fatherhood would be doomed to fail. But I made a conscious decision not to live my life like that. And thanks to this life-altering teaching of the prophet Ezekiel, I came to understand that other people's failures didn't have to be my failures; other people's decisions didn't necessarily determine my decisions. Unfortunately many people are caught in a cycle of repeating the abuses, the habits, the behaviors of those who came before them.

Did you know that a child whose parents abused alcohol is 4 times more likely to abuse alcohol than children of non-alcoholic parents. Children who witness domestic abuse are much more inclined to believe that violence and intimidation are a proper way to resolve issues than children who didn't witness that growing up. Losing a parent to suicide at a young age tends to increase the chances of psychological disorders and suicide in the next generation; and yes, being a child of divorced parents makes one more likely to divorce and copy the behaviors they witnessed as children. But don't forget what Ezekiel said! There has to be a point where we say we are no longer going to be controlled by forces we never had control over in the first place; that we are taking back the power over our own lives and our own futures. Think about the words of the most haunting prayer of the high holiday season, *Unetaneh Tokef*:

*Mi yanuach, u'mi yanua*: Who will be at peace, and who will be troubled

*Mi yashkit, u'mi y'toraf*: who will be serene and who will be disturbed

*Mi yishalev, u'mi yit'yaser*: who will be tranquil and who will be tormented

I've got news for you, I don't believe that God is sitting in heaven right now deciding which one of you is going to be at peace, who is going to experience serenity and tranquility in the coming year, and which of you are going to be troubled, disturbed, and tormented. I believe our destiny is much more in our own hands.

There is a powerful Midrash<sup>3</sup> that teaches this truth. The rabbis relate that there are three things that we can do to avert the evil decree. Three actions **that we can take** to positively affect our destiny. One is *shinuy makom*, we can change our place; literally move; to fundamentally alter our environment. As the Hebrew saying goes: *Mishanei makom, mishanei mazal*...Change your place, change your fortunes. So if you want a different future, go somewhere else. Now I really love all of you, and I'm not so sure I'm comfortable with that suggestion, not to mention it would be terrible for membership. The second is perhaps more realistic...most of us are not going to pack up our lives and move somewhere else in order to have a fresh new start, as romantic and idealistic as that sounds. The second way to change your destiny, to avert the evil decree is *shinuy ma'aseh*, to change our behavior. I certainly hope we're all thinking today about behaviors we can change in our lives that will make us better-off in the new year. But it's the third one that really strikes me: *Shinuy hashem*. To change your name; To literally change your identity. Now I'm not talking about going to the social security office in downtown Rockville to legally change your name. In fact, I hope you stay far away from that social security office...if hell really exists, I'm pretty sure the address is 315 N. Washington Street. Avoid it at all costs! I'm talking about a different kind of name change. That guy at my in-laws party is known by everyone as the guy who goes to the cemetery every day. That's the identity he has assumed for himself. That's literally the name he's made for himself How many of us walk around with identities like that--Identities that link us to negative or unhealthy parts of our lives? Stop thinking of yourself in those terms, the rabbis say! For God's sake, change your name, so that

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your whole identity isn't wrapped up in shame or despair. So that when you look in the mirror you don't see disappointment or failure, but instead see hope, and promise, and blessing.

Isn't that what we ask God to do for us in the mahzor? In the silent Amidah, when the conversation is just between us and God, we say *m'chay v'ha-aveir p'sha'eynu ve'chatoteynu mineged einecha*: Erase, blot out, disregard entirely all the negativity, the sin, the wrongdoing, the failures in our lives. In other words, change our names God, so that we're no longer associated with those things! So that those episodes, those names, those memories no longer define us.

Friends, we are about to say Yizkor. We are about to remember those who came before us. As we utter their names in the course of these prayers, think about the names that were associated with them; think about what you remember about them when you pronounce their names. And think about the names that are attached to you; how are you known in this world; what names do you call yourself. And someday, may it not be for a very long time, when your children recite Yizkor for you, what will they recall about you. What names will they associate with your memory. Now is the time to change those names if necessary, to name yourself and your destiny in all the ways you wish to live now, and wish to be remembered for in the future. The choice is yours; and as a new year dawns, there's no time like the present to go ahead and change your name...