

There But For the Grace of God...

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This is my thirty-first *Rosh Hashanah* here at Temple Ner Tamid. That's more than half my life. And while that adds up to nearly 120 completely unique and different *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* sermons (except for one, but I'm not telling which one), I realize that an inordinate amount of the content of those High Holy Day sermons was, in one form or another, a reflection of *personal* experience. I have shared with you of my trip to the Kushner family *shtetl* of *Mokraya Kaligorka* in Ukraine back in the early 90s, and of the experience of moving into our new home on Glenridge Parkway eleven years ago, and of the death of my mother in 2004—and so many others of my experiences of the year gone by. Because I believe that the stories of our lives are actually lessons. And the truth be told, the teachings I give on this *bimah* are more lessons for me than they are for you. I'm just working them through out loud and in public.

Over the course of these sermonic sharings, you have come to know a lot about me. Especially my summer vacations. I can't tell you how many times over the past two to three months you would come up to me and say, "So what are you doing this summer? Are you going back to Maine? Are you planning on buying any more antiques?" It's like having 900 aunts and uncles. But this is the price I pay for being a homiletical exhibitionist.

But this year was a little more difficult. With both the girls away for the entire summer, and my not being very good at going on a vacation by myself, as each week passed during July and into August I saw the window of getting away slowly get smaller and smaller. I tried to rationalize that a *staycation* was just as good as a *vacation*, maybe even better. It's certainly a lot cheaper, and the opportunity to just hang out at home and have dinner with friends (before or after *they* go away on *their* vacation) is really quite a blessing. This is what I kept telling myself, anyway. So when people would ask, "How's your summer been?" invariably I would respond "Great" and then quickly change the subject.

And then I got an email from my daughter, Aviva. She was coming home from Israel about 10 days earlier than she had planned. And when I asked, "Would you like to go away for maybe a week, like up to Maine or somewhere?" she replied emphatically "Absolutely". It was as if a door had been unlocked. I didn't even have to plan. I pulled out the Maine Atlas (which is infinitely superior to any GPS you can buy), recharged the camera battery, and got psyched for the 8-hour drive to the L.L. Bean "mother-store" in Freeport, Maine. The fact that it rained non-stop from New Jersey to Kittery was a minor footnote.

We had a great time. We didn't spend too much money in Freeport (although I did get an incredible deal on a lightweight barn-coat at the Polo outlet), we had a delightful two days at Pemaquid Point (one of North America's most scenic spots), we had blueberry pie at Moody's diner (one of the true delicacies of the Western world) in Waldoboro, and we spent nearly a full week with good friends in Brooksville along the shores of the Bagaduce River in Maine's Blue Hill peninsula. We boated, we visited Acadia (and had the world-famous popovers of Jordan Pond), and Aviva even endured my obsession of needing to daily visit an antique store, especially the Big Chicken Barn just outside of Ellsworth. I know. This is sounding like an Infomercial for the Maine Department of Tourism. It's just that it was such a *mechayeh* to

escape with my daughter, even for just a few days. (*Mechayeh*, for those unfamiliar with the Yiddish expression, is rooted in the word *Chai*/ Life and it's *intensive*, implying something that "magnifies" life, something that "refreshes" life, "enhances" life.) After all, isn't this what a vacation is supposed to be? To refresh and restore our life-force? To allow us, especially we Jews, to help transition from the old year into the New Year...*renewed?*

And so I felt all the way home. Renewed. And refreshed. We got up at four in the morning, the car already packed from the night before, and made our way home, retracing our path along Interstates 95, 90 and 84. The weather this time was clear and sunny. A perfect day to drive home. In fact, everything was perfect. Until, driving through Connecticut, just past Hartford, as the traffic slowed for construction, I recalled passing this spot on the way up. How odd, I thought to myself, I had forgotten all about it. Put it out of my mind. Completely. How, on the way up we had also encountered slow traffic. Except on the *other* side of the highway. In the steady rain. Eight days earlier. And how I had been feeling impatient and annoyed. Until, that is, we passed the accident. Two cars spun out along the highway's median. Steam coming out from under the hood of one of the cars. And along the way the highway patrolman motioning for cars to "keep moving". And as we passed the scene, there were three men escorting the gurney to the ambulance. The body was covered completely, from toes to head, with the proverbial white sheet. "It's probably to keep the person dry from the rain," I said to Aviva. But inside I knew different. The ambulance crew was walking slowly. Too slowly.

"How odd," I thought as I passed that place on the way back home. How odd that I would have put that incident totally out of my mind. As if it never really happened. Maybe because it didn't happen to *me*. Or maybe because I wanted to have a good time and I wasn't going to allow it to dampen the joy I had waited for all summer. Or maybe because I knew that if I allowed myself to think about it, I mean *really* think about it, I wouldn't be able to think about much anything else. It's like an instinctive defense-mechanism we all have. There's just only so much we can deal with, so much we can process, if, that is, we hope to be able to live out our daily lives. We can't stop to think about all the pain and tragedy that fills our world each day. It would just be too much. So we filter. We filter out the stuff that we don't have to deal with. Because, after all, we know—deep inside—that sooner or later we will have to face this stuff. "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

It's a popular phrase. "There, but for the grace of God, go I." Attributed to the 16th century preacher John Bradford who, upon seeing a criminal about to be executed, reportedly remarked, "There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford." Actually he had no idea how accurate he was. Even prophetic. For just a short time later he, too, would be executed. The fact of the matter is the attribution to Bradford is dubious. But no matter. The *truth* of the phrase, "There, but for the grace of God, go I," is indisputable.

Who's to say that what happens to him couldn't happen to me? What assurance do I have that that tragedy on the highway won't be mine the next time? Maybe that's why we don't like to think about those things. Because we know that there are no guarantees. And thinking about it, on some subconscious level, perhaps is almost inviting it. So we put it out of mind. We acknowledge the tragedy. We observe a moment of sadness. We say a prayer, maybe. A *Barukh Dayan Ha-Emet*. Blessed is the True Judge. And then we drive on. What else can we do? Stop to really wonder who that person under the sheet is? Where she was going? Maybe home? Maybe to work? Maybe to Maine? Can we possibly allow ourselves to imagine what the rest of that day was like for those who got the phone call? How they must have felt? How the

news of the death of their loved one would change their plans—and their lives—forever? Can you really fault me for allowing my shock and sadness, howbeit sincere, to be just momentary—so that I could go back to my vacation, to my daughter, to my life? “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” Indeed. How true. So understand what a gift this is, this thing we call Life, and *live* it. It *is* a gift. And as these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, are designed to remind us—it doesn’t last forever.

I should tell you, I’m a pretty big fan of Laura Linney. She’s beautiful. She’s an extraordinary actor. She’s funny. But it wasn’t until this summer, when I had the opportunity to read Frank Bruni’s insightful essay of her in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, that I came to appreciate how thoughtful and wise she is. Speaking of her new *Showtime* television series, *The Big “C”*, which she not only stars in but produces as well, Linney reflects on how she identifies with her character who has just been diagnosed with inoperable, terminal cancer. She says, “The undertow of [the show] deals with all the stuff I’ve been obsessing about anyway: time. Living. Aging. Mostly, the privilege of aging.” And it was that last phrase in particular that just reached up and kind of smacked me across the face. That’s it, I realized. She’s right. It’s more than just a gift. Even more than a blessing. What do those words mean anyway? Of course life’s a gift. We don’t ask to be born. It’s given to us. And of course life’s a blessing. But to think of not just *life* but *aging* as a “privilege”, that’s a perspective—it occurred to me—that we could do well to embrace.

Do you know what the word *privilege* means? I presume we all do, basically. We use it all the time. But what it *really* means—especially on this day—is more than apropos.

A *privilege* is a special entitlement to immunity granted by...another...either by birth or on a conditional basis. It can be revoked in certain circumstances...By contrast, a *right* is an inherent, irrevocable entitlement...from the moment of birth. Etymologically a privilege means a "private law", or rule relating to a specific individual.

In other words, as opposed to a *right* which is “inherent”, a *privilege* is “granted” to us, is conditional (meaning it can be taken away at any time), and at its root the word applies to each of us “individually”. Laura Linney got it “spot on”. Aging, the blessing of getting older, is a “privilege”. It’s a very good thing.

It’s interesting how our modern world has distanced itself from the value of aging. We don’t want to do it. We try everything in our power to avoid it. Maybe like a latter-day *Peter Pan* complex, we are so enamored with youth and its vitality that we view life’s process of maturation as a decline, as something we’d rather not face. And so we devote much of our lives to pretending (or fooling ourselves) that we’re not getting older. I’m not even going to give you the examples of how it is we do this. We are all—and I include myself here—experts at staying, a la Bob Dylan, “forever young”. But it’s not true. Obviously. We get older. (We hope.) And whether we like it or not, because the laws of nature will remind us no matter what, life—if privileged to be lived to its fullest—follows a continuum. Or, as Rabbi Alvin Fine’s powerful poem we read at the end of the *Kol Nidre* service puts it,

“...life is a journey: from childhood to maturity and youth to age; from innocence to awareness and ignorance to knowing; from foolishness to discretion and then, perhaps, to wisdom; from weakness to strength and strength to weakness—and, often, back again; from health to sickness and back, we pray, to health again...”

And this is my favorite part,

“...from defeat to defeat to defeat—until looking backward or ahead we see that victory lies not at some high place along the way, but in having made the journey, stage by stage, a sacred pilgrimage.”

Indeed, it is “a sacred pilgrimage”. And it’s also a sacred *privilege*. For as Rabbi Fine so eloquently understands, that process is a journey “from” and “to”. Which is to say, even as we celebrate and delight in the “journey”, even as we teach our children and remind ourselves to stop and smell the roses, to not be so focused on getting there but to delight in the path itself, nevertheless we need to know that the direction in which we are going is something not to be avoided. Even as we know it will someday end, the highlights along the way—not merely those we have passed but especially those that are yet to come—are filled with wonder and joy, even if it might eventually take us a little more time to get up the stairs to experience them.

Maybe I’m a bit more focused on this because I crossed the threshold into my seventh decade of living this past year. (For those of you trying to do the math, I turned sixty.) And you know what? I like it. Even as I remember thinking as a kid when my parents turned sixty that they were “really old” and that that awareness frightened me, as I’ve aged I can’t quite say that I’ve gotten better, but what I can say is that I’m genuinely grateful for having made it this far and I so enjoy looking forward to all the things awaiting me, God-willing, especially in this coming year. That’s the way it works for us Jews. We get a year at a time. And for me, the joy is in knowing I have been privileged to enter yet another year.

The following story (which I learned from my brother who learned it from Danny Matt) is told about Rabbi David ibn Zimra who had been queried by a Jew named Reuven who was in prison. It seems that Reuven had convinced his jailers that he should be allowed to leave prison, because the fulfillment of *mitzvot*—especially prayer—must be performed in community, in the presence of others. Surprisingly, the official in charge of the jail agreed to his request, except on the condition that he be released for only one day of the year.

Reuven’s dilemma was he didn’t know which day to take. Perhaps he should choose *Yom Kippur*? After all, it’s the holiest day of the Jewish year. It’s the day when all Jews gather to seek atonement for their sins. Especially for Reuven, a sinner condemned to prison, what better choice than to pray for forgiveness for his sins on *Yom Kippur*. But on the other hand, *Purim*—the opposite of *Yom Kippur*, exactly one half year away—is a day filled with unbridled joy and merriment. What better day to choose for someone confined to the darkness of prison than the bright rejoicing of *Purim*.

Reuven didn’t know what to do. He was stuck. So he wrote a *sh’ayla*, a formal question to the great Rabbi David ibn Zimra. No doubt he could solve Reuven’s dilemma. The Rabbi’s *teshuvah* or response was instructive, not only for Reuven but for us as well.

Even though the observance of *Yom Kippur* would certainly take precedence over the celebration of *Purim*—and indeed, the authority in the Talmud ibn Zimra checked affirmed that Reuven should opt for *Yom Kippur*—ibn Zimra took a different position. He wrote back to Reuven in prison:

“The *first* mitzvah that is available to you should take precedence. You should pay no attention to the relative importance of one mitzvah over another, because—when all is said and done—you have no way of knowing at the time which mitzvah is ultimately of more importance. Don’t choose *Yom Kippur*. Don’t choose *Purim*. Choose today. Go out now!”

And this is the great lesson. Life, the privilege of aging, is nothing more than the daily encounter with the Now. Each day. Each moment. They are all sacred gifts on loan to us. And on this day, the New Year, we are commanded—but even more to the point, privileged—to reach deep within ourselves and sound the shofar of our hearts, to acknowledge and affirm and rejoice in the air we breathe and the loving souls with whom we are blessed to be co-travelers.

Life is good. It may sound trite (the kind of words you would imprint on a t-shirt or a hat), but there is no truth more enduring.

*Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melekh Ha-Olam
She-he-che-yanu, V'kimanu, V'hi-gi'yanu
Lazman Ha-zeh.*

This is the most essential prayer of our tradition. And it's my favorite.

God, I praise You for blessing me with life, for miraculously keeping me alive these sixty years, and for enabling me to express this praise—especially on this day.