

**Writing the Stories of our Lives**  
**Rosh Hashanah Morning, 5784**  
**September 16, 2023**  
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**Shir Ami Congregation, Newtown PA**

Every year in the beginning of August, Karen asks what I plan to speak about during the High Holy Days. In good years, I've outlined every sermon and can articulate the messages I want to convey. In bad years I can't answer her question until a week before Rosh Hashanah. Sometimes when I am looking for ideas or inspiration, I ask her what she wants or needs to hear.

For several weeks, I've been thinking about the idea of legacy and how we write the story of our lives. A question that has been on my mind is this: "If, God forbid, I were to die today, how would I be remembered? What is the legacy I would leave behind?"

I showed Karen a draft of the sermon last week. It didn't resonate. "Leaving a legacy isn't important to me," she said.

"I'd rather make sure that what I am doing right here, right now matters."

"You don't care how others will remember you?" I asked?

"Not really; there's nothing I can do about it. I'll be dead."

She was very matter of fact.

"But what I *can* do now," she continued, "is always to try to make an impact so that I affect people's lives for the good. Knowing that I am making an impact today is much more meaningful than wondering what people might say about me after I am dead."

So today, I'd like you to reflect on this question: What is more important to you? To leave behind a rich and enduring legacy so that you and your good deeds will be remembered into the next generation? Or to live your best life now, doing good works, and making an impact ever mindful that today day could be your last.

Our disagreement may simply be that we are looking at this idea of legacy differently. Both of us want to make a difference, affect lives for the good, and make our world a better place through the small and simple acts we perform every day.

Maybe I am just vain while Karen is not, but I want to be remembered long after I am gone. I want to leave a legacy, a name, so that I will be remembered. When people see my headstone I want them to say, "Now that Chuck Briskin; he made a difference."

Maybe instead of asking what we want our legacy to be, we should ask the question differently: If, God forbid, you were to die tomorrow, would you like what people say about you? If not, what would you need to do to change it?

I spend a lot of time in cemeteries and, to be honest, I like being there. I like examining rows of closely placed headstones, each bearing the name and dates of the person buried below. Some are etched with the words “beloved pop-pop; cherished father; loving wife.” I wish some were more humorous such as, “I Told You I Was Sick” or “Nice Shoes,” but most are basic and to the point. I notice the names and dates which simply tell me the length of their life. Little else.

That is why we have eulogies. A well-known poem called The Dash is often read at funerals. It speaks of the dash between the years, how the person spent their time on earth, not what they had but how they lived, how they treated others and, ultimately, how they might be remembered. The final stanza reads. “So, when your eulogy is being read / with your life’s actions to rehash / would you be proud of the things they say/ about how you spent your dash?”

What do you want said about your dash? That you left behind a rich and enduring legacy of service and numerous contributions to the betterment of humankind?  
Or simply that you did your best with the time and resources you had, for those closest to you.  
Do you care if you are remembered, and how you are remembered?

Rosh Hashanah asks us to reflect on existential questions like these. Does what we do matter? What motivates us? When we run adrift from our essential selves, what is the t’shuvah we do that returns and anchors us so that we can become, once again, the best version of ourselves?

Most of us are good and decent and will be remembered positively by those closest to us. Yet, in a generation or two, we will likely be forgotten. Sadly, I don’t know anything about my great grandparents.

However, some people leave enduring legacies behind and, by accident or deliberately, their names will live on for a long, long time.

One such example is our forefather, Abraham. We still read about him several thousand years after his death. This morning’s challenging Torah portion describes Abraham preparing to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to God. Abraham had been promised land and progeny.

He was to become a great nation and blessing to others. God set him up to bequeath a very rich legacy. Yet Abraham almost throws it all away. His unquestioning willingness to sacrifice his son is a test of Abraham's faith. We know how it ends. At the last minute an angel calls down to Abraham; he then lowers the knife, notices a ram caught in the thicket, and sacrifices it instead of Isaac.

After this terrifying episode Abraham is even more concerned about his legacy. Despite father and son never speaking again, Abraham sends his servant to find a wife for Isaac to ensure that the line and legacy of Abraham and Sarah would continue, rather than ending after just one generation.

The story could have ended when Abraham and Isaac came down from the mountain and parted ways. But Abraham made sure his legacy, checkered as it was, would endure. He was deliberate in making sure that his good name would be invoked forever.

Abraham's enduring legacy was deliberate and ordained by God. Others are deliberate too, in ways less divine. Bill Gates is one of the richest persons in the world, having earned billions as the founder and CEO of Microsoft. When he left the company as CEO in 2008 he poured himself into the projects of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The billions of dollars he has donated to the Foundation provide funding for, among other things, global public health initiatives. Many of his projects eradicate easily treatable diseases that proliferate in the developing world with simple and inexpensive medication and vaccines.

Gates has worked deliberately to ensure he is remembered for much more than founding Microsoft and being phenomenally wealthy. When he dies, he plans to donate the bulk of his wealth to the foundation. His legacy will endure for generations because of his investment in the future, his positive global impact, and the millions of lives saved not just the billions of dollars earned.

Unlike Bill Gates, Alfred Nobel is an *accidental* philanthropist. He invented dynamite, initially to be used in construction projects. He knew its great destructive power but never imagined that someone could be so evil to use dynamite against other human beings. Nevertheless, he amassed great wealth from the sale of it.

In 1876, Alfred Nobel's brother, Ludwig, died, but the newspapers mistakenly published Alfred's obituary instead. The headline read, "Alfred Nobel, The Merchant of Death, is Dead." He realized that this is how others were going to remember him after he died, and it rattled him. So, he changed the narrative. He revised his will and left his massive fortune to a foundation that would recognize and honor those who advanced the cause of humanity, most notably, the Nobel Peace Prize. Nobel had an opportunity most of us never have; to learn how we would be remembered, then to rewrite the story of his life to create a better ending. Yes, he invented dynamite, but he is remembered more for encouraging the pursuit of peace, scientific discoveries, and knowledge. He did not intend to use his fortune in this manner until he chose to rewrite his life's story, and establish a different legacy of which he could be proud.

Successful innovators and creators like Nobel and Gates are few and far between. Most of us will not make a global impact or be remembered for a life changing discovery or contribution to humankind. But I imagine we all want to be remembered within a closer circle of family and friends, colleagues and community for our good works and thoughtful actions. We want to be remembered because we were generous, kind, and compassionate. Because we were loyal, invested, and available. Because we taught others important life skills. Because we defended the vulnerable and oppressed. Because we used our knowledge and understanding to help people become financially secure. Because we saved lives and healed souls. These vital acts may not earn us a front-page obituary, yet those who knew, loved, and cherished us will be inspired to tell the story of our lives.

A doctor friend of mine was diagnosed with a terminal form of leukemia and was given a year to live. While he was still alive and relatively vibrant, his daughter, also a physician, organized a "celebration of life." Her father's friends and colleagues gathered, and with her father seated in the front row, regaled him with stories, and shared just how much he meant to them.

She wanted to be sure he knew the impact he had on others while he was still alive to appreciate it. To know that he made a difference. Similar words were shared at his funeral, but how lucky was he to hear these praises with his own ears?

Unless you are a real control freak, you will not write your own eulogy. Others will. Your life's decisions, values, contributions, and priorities will create the story that others will say about you, how you'll be remembered, and what your lasting legacy will be for future generations to determine. While you are still alive and in control, what is the story you want to write?

Abraham and Sarah's legacy is the flourishing of the Jewish people. This would not be the case had Abraham not heard the call of the Angel to lower the knife. Bill Gates continues to intentionally create a legacy for himself by funding cures and treatments for diseases. Alfred Nobel's legacy was accidental; a mistake in the newspaper inspiring him to change the course of his life so he'd be remembered for his positive contributions to our world.

My obituary won't be on the front page. Famous people won't eulogize me. But I hope that, when I die and my family and friends eulogize me, they will remember me in part for touching their lives, and inspiring them, my community, and my people, to be the best version of themselves.

Rosh Hashanah is sometimes called Yom T'ruah—the Day of the Sounding of the Shofar. The great Medieval Rabbi, Maimonides, demands we listen closely to the shofar, declaring, “wake yourselves from your sleep, arouse yourself from your slumber.” The Shofar reawakens me and reminds me that I need to live more intentionally. The Shofar stirs me into action, inspiring me to make choices that will better my life and the lives of my family and community.

The Shofar cries out to me, telling me to be alert and deliberate, especially when I veer off track and lose focus. It reminds me that I should not live by accident or by rote, but to live according to who I want to continue to become. The Shofar reminds me that I can still write the story of my life, make changes that are needed, and return to my best self. Ultimately, I can create the narrative that I want others to remember. And so can you.

AMEN

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