Yizkor Sermon 5784
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Writing Our Own Stories

Imagine this scene: upbeat music is blasting, everyone is dancing in a synchronized and choreographed way, food is being passed around, drinks are enjoyed, there isn't a face without a smile. And then someone asks, "You guys ever think about dying?" Who invited that party-crasher? Way to ruin the mood! If this scene sounds familiar, then that is probably because you saw the *Barbie* movie this summer. The film was an absolute smashing success, with over $1 billion in ticket sales, making its director, Greta Gerwig, the first solo female director to reach that milestone. The plot unfolds from this line. Stereotypical *Barbie* confronts her own mortality. Barbie's malfunctions begin to destroy the perfect pink world in which she resides. But there is a different version of this story to tell. Contemplating death does not destroy our world or ruin our lives. In fact, contemplating our own mortality has the potential to reinvigorate our life and imbue it with even greater meaning.

As part of our Scientists in Synagogues series earlier this year we hosted David DeSteno, a professor of psychology at Northeastern University. The subject of our conversation was DeSteno's book, *How God Works: The Science Behind the Benefits of Religion*. DeSteno demonstrates how religious rituals and traditions can have an incredibly powerful psychological impact on the practitioner. He is not interested in addressing questions of theology, but he is interested in revealing how being a practitioner of a religious tradition can help you navigate through the highs and lows of life. Regarding these Yamim Noraim, these Days of Awe, he writes that they, "represent the cycle of life. They begin on Rosh Hashanah with a celebration of the

creation of humankind, and end on Yom Kippur with reminders of inescapable death."[1] Similarly, Rabbi Alan Lew says of Yom Kippur, "For the next twenty-four hours you rehearse your own death."[2] We concretize the feeling of confronting our mortality in this dress rehearsal for death by wearing white, like the shrouds, *tachrichim*, in which a Jewish body is wrapped for burial. We do not engage in bodily pleasures like eating, drinking, bathing, and anointing, for what corpse is in need of such earthly matters?

The purpose of this dress rehearsal for death is not to depress us, or make us somber and meek. In a recent article in *The New York Times*, DeSteno wrote, "Contemplating death helps people make decisions about their future that brings them more happiness."[3] When we confront death, even only on a theoretical level, then our minds are better equipped to determine what it is that truly brings us joy and fulfillment in life. Simply showing up on Yom Kippur, wearing our non-leather shoes and white garments, that is apparently all we need to begin the process of refining and clarifying our values, hopes, and dreams for greater happiness in life.

But it isn't only the garb that helps us to reach these realizations. DeSteno also describes the psychological power of reciting *Vidui*, the confessional prayer, beating our chests with each named sin. He writes, "Somewhat surprisingly, the melody of the chant isn't a solemn one; it's uplifting. But that actually fits with Yom Kippur's purpose: to make people feel empowered to change their ways rather than remain in the morass of their sins."[4] It is in that seemingly

[1] David DeSteno, *How God Works*, p. 145.
[2] Alan Lew, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, p. 4.
[3] David DeSteno, "Rosh Hashana Can Change Your Life," in *The New York Times*, September 13, 2023.
[4] DeSteno, p. 146.

contradictory combination of solemn confession and uplifting aspiration where we find the will to transform ourselves for the year ahead. It is this combination of experiences that should motivate us to engage in the sacred work of *heshbon hanefesh*, taking a careful look at who we have been, and transforming ourselves into who we aspire to be.

Yom Kippur serves, therefore, as what Rev. Dr. Herbert Anderson calls a "mortality moment." Anderson, a Lutheran pastor and retired professor of pastoral care, teaches that we would be better served if we look upon death as part of God's creation, as something that God declared to be good, and thereby learn "to live with mortality and sickness and death rather than railing against them."[5] Our pursuits should not be towards limitless lifespans, but should accept our ultimate fate and in so doing we should be inspired to make the most of the life that we are given. He teaches us to look upon death as both "a friend and an enemy, a moment and a process, a fate and an act, a disruptive end and the gracious fulfillment of a life."[6] Life is so much more precious if we can accept our own mortality.

Our tradition reminds us throughout these Days of Awe that it is our actions that matter most. God does not record in the Book of Life whether we *considered* spending more quality time with our family, or *contemplated* calling our friends more often. The test is to actually *do* those things. And when we do these things, our stories are recorded, inscribed, written. You are all probably familiar with the Talmud's (Rosh Hashanah 16b) teaching that two books are opened up on Rosh Hashanah: the Book of Life and the Book of Death. The *tzadikkim*, the incredibly righteous, are inscribed in the Book of Life. The *r'shaim*, the terribly wicked, are

[5] Rev. Dr. Herbert Anderson, "Intimations of Mortality," *Masorti*, Vol. 67, No. 1, Winter 2022-2023, p. 97.
[6] Anderson, p. 98.

inscribed in the Book of Death. And the majority of us, the *beinonim*, the middle ones, our verdict is suspended until Yom Kippur. But a student of the Ba'al Shem Tov, Yaakov Yosef, offers a slightly different perspective, suggesting that it is not God who inscribes us in these books, but we do the writing ourselves.[7] We are empowered to write our own stories. This is how we face our own mortality and this is our response to recognizing that death is inevitable. We are the authors of our lives.

In a lecture on discoveries and inventions, President Abraham Lincoln said, "Writing…is the great invention of the world…great, very great in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and of space."[8] Writing is a powerful tool because it enables us to express thoughts and ideas, to immortalize that which we wish to communicate across generations and through time. When Rabbi Matthew H. Simon passed away a few weeks ago, his life and legacy were immortalized through the written word in letters, emails, eulogies, and articles. In the *Washington Jewish Week*, Rabbi Simon was remembered for his lifetime of contributions to this congregation and to the Greater Washington Jewish community. Rabbi Simon was responsible for bringing egalitarianism to B'nai Israel, for helping to create the Consolidated Hebrew School, for founding MERCAZ, the Zionist branch of our movement, and for serving on various boards to benefit the Jewish community and the Jewish world. I would like to believe that Rabbi Simon understood from his years in the pulpit that life was precious and that death was inevitable, and that is precisely what motivated him to work tirelessly for the Jewish community. Up until a few weeks before his passing, Rabbi Simon

[7] Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, "Choosing to Choose," in *Choice and Change* from JTS, 2023, p. 4.
[8] President Abraham Lincoln, "Second Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions," in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Volume 3*, p. 360.

visited the office almost every day, offering his wisdom, support, and *hizuk*, strength to everyone involved in this incredible enterprise of serving our congregation at B'nai Israel. As a rabbi of this congregation, I am indebted to Rabbi Simon for his leadership, and it is our responsibility to perpetuate his legacy. We will continue to write his story, to tell his story, and to make sure that future generations know him, even without being able to meet him.

If this is the true power of typical writing, then how much greater is the potential impact of that which is inscribed in the celestial books that are opened on these sacred days of the year. When we recite Unetaneh Tokef, a hallmark of the High Holiday liturgy, we read,

וְתִפְתַּח אֶת סֵפֶר הַזִּכְרוֹנוֹת וּמֵאֵלָיו יִקָּרֵא וְחוֹתָם יַד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ

"You recall all that is forgotten, and will open the book of remembrance, which speaks for itself, for our own hands have signed the page." *Sefer hazikhronot*, the book of remembrance, has within it a sort of accounting of our deeds. The power of that book is not that God sat and accounted for each one of us individually, but that our own hands signed the page—we affirmed that it does indeed reflect who we truly are. But again, it is not God who directs our actions or determines our next move. It is we who are the authors. We write the story. That power is imbued within each one of us.

Yet we know that not everything we experience in life is within our control. There are things that happen around us, to us, to our loved ones, that are beyond our capacity to dramatically change. Often these are the greatest challenges of our lives. If we cannot simply rewrite certain portions of our stories, how do we move forward with the frustration and pain that these events often leave in their wake? In an essay reflecting on the power of this High Holiday season, Dr. Shuly Rubin Schwartz, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, points

out that the Torah readings for Rosh Hashanah are emotionally complex and problematic. She writes, "our tradition demonstrates the power of storytelling in processing our pain."[9] Dr. Schwartz teaches us that writing is not the only tool; storytelling, even if it is the retelling of someone else's narrative, has the capacity to help us heal. Last week on Rosh Hashanah we read about the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, the birth of Isaac, and his near sacrifice. The range of emotions in these two chapters is incredibly wide. There is a healing power in reading these narratives as we transition into a new year. Hearing these stories, suffused with emotions ranging from suffering and terror to joy and relief helps us to contextualize our own lives and our own stories. We cannot control everything that happens to us or to our loved ones, but we can control how we respond. That is where writing your own story, being the author of your own narrative, comes into play. This is what is recorded in the great celestial scroll of our deeds—how have we lived our lives in response to the good, to the bad, and to everything between.

In his 2020 novel, *The Midnight Library*, author Matt Haig depicts a world where between life and death exists a library. In this library are infinite stacks stretching in all directions, and on every shelf is a book that allows you to experience an alternative version of your life had you made other choices. Each decision we make is an opportunity to write a different version of our lives, to take control of our story and tell it differently. If you are not satisfied with a choice you made yesterday, rectify it by making a better one tomorrow. One passage in the book compares life to a tree, with branches heading off in all directions, with each branch developing branches of its own, and all the way until it reaches the small twigs at

[9] Dr. Shuly Rubin Schwartz, "The Torah's Stories—and Our Own" in *Choice and Change* from JTS, 2023, p. 2.

the branch's end. These branches and twigs symbolize the limitless possibilities of life, all of the places you could have gone or will still go.[10] It is incumbent upon each one of us to recognize that although I am currently on one branch or reaching one twig, there are many other branches and twigs where I could have been instead. If I am not content or satisfied with where I am now, then I have the autonomy and the responsibility to branch out in a new direction.

At the conclusion of the Barbie movie, the character who is supposed to be the inventor of Barbie, Ruth Handler, says to her creation: "Ideas live forever. Humans—not so much." She has a point there. Our physical existence in the world is finite. It is helpful and healthful for us to remember that fact. But ideas live forever. Our existence does not end when we physically depart from this earth. The stories of our lives, the legacy that we leave behind, that which is written into the metaphorical Book of Life, all of that endures forever, and we have the responsibility to write that story ourselves.

Yizkor, the memorial prayer that we will recite momentarily, is about remembering the stories of others. Although we were certainly a significant part of their narratives, we were not the authors. Our parents, siblings, spouses, children, family members, and friends each lived their own life. As we rise to remember them with Yizkor, we remember their stories and we glean from them lessons for how we wish to write our own. We might feel anger that a loved one was taken from us too soon. We might feel regret that we did not have enough time to experience them and their gifts to the world. We might feel relief that their pain and suffering are over. We might feel guilt, or sadness, or many other emotions that we experience when we suffer a loss. On this Yom Kippur, in this mortality moment, we acknowledge those emotions

[10] Matt Haig, *The Midnight Library*, Location 1470.

and harness them to inspire us to live better lives, to appreciate each moment, and to be the authors of our stories for a year of opportunity, blessing, and life that has yet to be written.

May the memories of our loved ones be a blessing for us all, and we may all be inscribed in the Book of Life. G'mar hatimah tovah.