

Sermon: The Hidden Things

יום הכיפורים תשפ"א / Yom Kippur 5781

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Twice a week, Marcy would babysit the Waldman children until their mother, Phyllis, returned home from work. One day, as Marcy was leaving, Phyllis said to her, “Marcy, I hope you are saving up to buy yourself something special after all of this hard work babysitting my children!” Marcy looked to the ground and tried to compose herself. She hesitated at first, but could not hold back. She looked up at Phyllis and told her that when she got home, her parents took the money. They were struggling with alcoholism, so they took the money for themselves, and she had not saved anything. Marcy told Phyllis that she did not babysit for the money; she babysat for the Waldman family because she felt safe in their home, and she cared about them because she knew that they cared about her. But Phyllis wouldn’t hear of it—Marcy deserved to be paid. She deserved to have spending money of her own as a teenager. So, whenever she could, Phyllis paid Marcy double the amount, “Give this half to your parents, and keep this half for yourself.” Knowing that Marcy’s home life was in other ways complicated, even abusive, Phyllis did what she could to bring joy and happiness to this young woman, to show her that she was loved, and cared for.

Marcy continued to babysit for the family for many years and grew very close with parents Phyllis and Dave, and their four children—two boys and twin girls. One year, Phyllis gave Marcy pearl earrings for her birthday. She saved them for years, and wore them on her wedding day to remind her of the love shown to her by this wonderful person. But nobody else knew any of these stories about Phyllis and her kindness and generosity. It was a secret between Marcy and Phyllis.

Last December, Phyllis passed away. On the day of her funeral, Phyllis' children received an email from their childhood babysitter, Marcy. In that email, Marcy shared with them these stories and others, examples of the incredible kindness and generosity of their mother, a woman who did what she could to show love and affection for another. For decades, nobody knew any of this, not even Phyllis' husband. You can imagine how it felt to hear all of this for the first time. You see, I was there when that email was read, because Phyllis was my grandmother. Marcy was my mother's childhood babysitter.

The thirteen grandchildren of Phyllis, affectionately known to us by her Yiddish name, Peshie, always knew that she was a loving, generous, and special woman. But none of us knew the extent of her *ma'asim tovim*, her good deeds. **There is so much about this beautiful person's life that we only learned after she was gone. How many other good deeds did she perform in the world?** What else did she do that we do not yet know about, and perhaps never will? I bring this story not because it is a unique one, but because it is so common. When our loved ones depart from this earth, it is not uncommon for family members, friends, and even complete strangers to step forward and share similar testimony, stories about what the deceased did for them in their time of need. What can we learn from these stories?

In our morning *tefillot*, we recite a very brief personal prayer near the beginning of the service: לעולם יהא אדם ירא שמים בסתר ובגלוי, **"One should always revere God, both in private and in public."** To revere God is to be an honest and righteous person, guided by morals, values, and the teachings of Judaism. One should strive to be a good person, a mensch, both in public and in private; when people are looking, and when they are not; when we will be rewarded, and when we will not. What we do *b'seiter*, in private, is as much part of our legacy as the things

that we do *b'galui*, in public. This morning prayer reminds us that we are a composite of that which we do in public and that which we do in private. In the eyes of God, the two cannot be separated, but are considered together in determining whether we are indeed *yirei shamayim*, those who revere God. But the good that is done privately does not always make its way into the open. Some stories remain secreted away. **They are the hidden things, the *nistarot*, that belong to that person and to God.** Whether we declare them openly or not, they are part of who we are, and who God sees when we stand before the Holy Blessed One on Yom Kippur. If and when we are privileged to know about the stories of others, then we have an obligation to share them, even or especially after they are gone, to perpetuate the values imparted to us by the lives they led. The hidden stories that they leave behind are their legacy, and we honor them by exemplifying the values of those stories in our own lives.

As human beings, we build our legacy during our time here in this world, and that legacy continues to grow and evolve when we are gone. We hope that it guides our descendants. Sometimes, a great part of our legacy is known and public. I cannot help but think of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, of blessed memory, and the legacy that she has left to our country, and to us as a Jewish community. She was a trailblazer, a powerful voice in our country for equality under the law for all Americans. And, she also leaves behind a more private legacy, a series of *ma'asim tovim*, good deeds, that she performed behind the scenes, off the bench, and out of sight. This past week, Debbie Levy, author of *Becoming RBG*, wrote about the Justice Ginsburg who she came to know while writing her books.¹ In her words, RBG was “so mensch-like.” She

¹ Debbie Levy, “Not Just a Justice, but Also a Mensch,” <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/ruth-bader-ginsburg-mensch>.

edited Levy's manuscript to show respect for her parents, opting to include their full names instead of just "Mr. Bader" and "Mrs. Bader." She made sure that she did not receive full credit when she was not solely responsible for a particular victory. In her interactions with this one person, she was just as noble as she was when sitting on the bench. The legacy that we leave behind is a composite of both—that which is revealed and that which is hidden.

On Yom Kippur, we stand before God in judgment and seek atonement for our misdeeds. But we are not just a ledger of our wrongdoings—we are also a record of our righteousness, all the things that we did that were good, that were praiseworthy, that were meritorious. We stand before God and pray that God remembers all of it, especially taking note of the good. And, in response to that good, we pray that we are sealed for a year in the Book of Life. Our liturgy, however, only includes the declaration of wrongdoings in the *Ashamnu* and *Al Heit*. They are formulated in the plural: *We* did these things. As we read along, we notice that, individually, we might be guilty of some items on these lists. But what about the good? If God takes note of everything, a full accounting and reckoning of our year, is there room to account for the good? A few years ago, Rabbi Avi Weiss, founding rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, wrote a *Vidui La'tov*, a confession of the good.²

אֶהְבֵנוּ, בִּרְכָנוּ, גִּדְלָנוּ, דִּבְרָנוּ יִפִּי

We have loved, we have blessed, we have grown, we have spoken positively.

הֶעֱלֵינוּ, וְחִסָּנוּ, זָרְזָנוּ

We have raised up, we have shown compassion, we have acted enthusiastically,

² Rabbi Avi Weiss, "Ahavnu, beirachnu: Yom Kippur is also a time to confess our good," <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/ahavnu-beirachnu-yom-kippur-is-also-a-time-to-confess-our-good>.

and it continues on in an acrostic form, concluding with

תִּמְכְּבוּ, תִּרְמְנוּ, תִּקְנוּ

We have supported, we have contributed, we have repaired.

There is so much good that we have done this year. Rabbi Weiss writes that Yom Kippur “is a day to combine tears, worries and regrets with smiles, confidence and a humble but positive sense of accomplishment.” This *Vidui La’tov*, when considered alongside the *Vidui La’ra*, paints a full portrait of who we are when we stand before God on Yom Kippur. Both are written in the plural, and both include actions we may have done, and others we have not done. We are reminded that we have the potential to do right and to do wrong, and that we can aspire to be better in the year ahead.

In one of the numbers in *Hamilton*, “History Has Its Eyes on You,” a wise President George Washington counsels a young Alexander Hamilton: Let me tell you what I wish I'd known / When I was young and dreamed of glory / You have no control / Who lives, who dies, who tells your story. Who lives and who dies is in the hands of God—that is a message that the liturgy repeats on these High Holidays. Over this we have very little control. But Judaism teaches otherwise about our story. Although we may not have complete control, we do have an obligation to be the tellers of our own stories. Once we depart from this world, then we no longer have control over *who* tells our story, nor do we control *how* they tell it. That is why it is so important that we live as *Yirei Shamayim*, those who revere God, both in private and in public, *b’seiter u’v’galui*. If we manage to do that, then our descendants will testify to our good, just as we stand here today and testify about the good of our forebears.

In a few moments we will recite the Yizkor memorial prayers. With Yizkor, we remember. We remember those who departed from this world years ago, and we remember those who departed more recently. We remember those who departed this world as a result of this pandemic, and we remember those who departed in the midst of it. When we remember them, I encourage you to remember their stories. We remember the stories known to all, and we remember the stories that are our precious holdings alone. We remember the parts of them that were known to all, the person who they were *b'galui*, in public. And we remember who they were to us *b'seiter*, in private. With Yizkor, we honor them, we honor their legacy, and we commit ourselves to embodying the values that they demonstrated in those stories.

On this Yom Kippur Day, we admit that we have fallen short, and we take pride that we have done well. We have done well publicly, and we have done well privately. **May God be a just and compassionate Judge, remembering us *l'tovah*, for good.** May we be remembered for good. May we be inscribed in the Book of Life. We honor the legacies of our loved ones, may they, too, be remembered for good, and let us inscribe their stories in our Book of Life.