

## Transforming Ourselves: To Life!

Yom Kippur 5783

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To borrow a phrase from Rabbi Naomi Levy, it feels in this moment like we are surrounded by souls. The lights in Hayman Chapel are all turned on. Our memorial booklets are filled with names, each representing a story – often evoking heartbreak, always conjuring feelings of loss. And the Torah portion we just read began with the words “*acharei mot*”; God spoke to Moses after the deaths of Aaron’s two sons, when the wounds were still fresh. But God doesn’t deliver a message about death or suffering. God asks Aaron to choose life: “You shall keep My laws and My rules, *vachai bahem*, that you may live by them.”

Among the more recognizable practices on Yom Kippur, we wear white. And there are multiple explanations. The 16<sup>th</sup>-century halakhist Rabbi Moshe Isserles says we wear clean white clothes to mimic the ministering angels – a very lofty idea. But he also offers another reason. White robes resemble death shrouds and Yom Kippur is a dress rehearsal for death. We wear white to break our hearts and crush our spirits. White is the color of exultation *and* humility.

It is also the color of celebration. Yom Kippur in ancient times was very different than our celebration today. In the Mishnah:

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel taught: No days of celebration ever rivaled the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av and Yom Kippur. On those days, the daughters of Jerusalem would go out *in white clothes* ... and dance in the vineyards. And they would call out, “*Bahur*, young man! Lift up your eyes and see what you might have!”

(I don’t know what you all have planned during the break today; does anyone want to go dancing?)

The notion of a *celebration* on Yom Kippur requires explanation. The Mishnah begins with the 15<sup>th</sup> of Av, Tu B’Av, a holiday that, regrettably, is not celebrated much anymore. It comes 6 days after Tisha B’Av, which is the darkest day on the Jewish calendar. Tisha B’Av is the day we mourn the destruction of the Jerusalem Temples and a host of other calamities that befell our people on the same day. Six days later, our ancestors celebrated Tu B’Av as a day of renewal and rebirth. If Tisha B’Av represents the dissolution of God’s covenant, Tu B’Av affirms our belief that the devastation will not last. As Jeremy Tabick suggests, the dancing and flirting represent a renewal of the relationship between God and the Jewish people.

And the same is true of Yom Kippur. Following the Rabbinic calculation, today is the day Moses received the second set of tablets on Mount Sinai. When Moses smashed the first tablets after witnessing the Golden Calf, it was as if he was smashing the covenant itself. The second tablets represent a mending of the relationship. The dancing women in the vineyards celebrated a

transformation of the relationship with God – from brokenness to renewal – every year. And they wore white.

And there was another important transformation in the Ancient Temple. After the sacrificial rituals were completed, the High Priest would place his hand on the head of a live goat, symbolically transferring all the people's transgressions onto this animal. He would send the goat off, and when it reached its destination, three Persian miles away in Bet Hidudo, the people knew their sins had been forgiven. But how did they know when the goat had reached its destination? Said Rabbi Ishmael, "A scarlet cord was tied to the entrance of the sanctuary. When the goat reached its destination in the wilderness, the cord would turn white" in fulfillment of a verse in Isaiah: 'Even if your sins be like crimson, they will become as white as snow.'" As our Mussaf liturgy puts it, this was the ultimate cause for celebration: "הושלג אָדָם תּוֹלַע", the red thread has turned white!"

So, that is why we wear white on Yom Kippur. It is as the Psalmist wrote: "הפכת מספדי למחול לי", You transformed my mourning into dancing, my sackcloth into robes of joy." And particularly in this moment before Yizkor, that proclamation becomes an aspiration: ***Acharei Mot: After the death, vachai bahem, you shall live.*** White affirms that it is not enough to get by; it's not enough to survive. In the face of tragedy and loss, we seek to live ... again.

In her book *To Begin Again*, Rabbi Naomi Levy tells the story of Louis, an elderly gentleman in her congregation who had survived the horrors of Auschwitz. Louis was a teenager when the Nazis marched into his small village in Hungary. He and his fellow villagers were sent to an overcrowded, filthy ghetto; and then they were forced into cattle cars and shipped off to Auschwitz. At Auschwitz, the infamous Dr. Joseph Mengele directed Louis's mother to the left and Louis to the right; he never saw his mother again. He ended up in a labor camp called Muhldorf in Bavaria, where he worked until the Nazis sensed their time was up. Louis and his fellow prisoners were forced onto a train, which traveled five days before stopping in the small German town Seeshaupt. Miraculously, as the train doors opened, Louis and all the others who had been packed into this cattle car were greeted by smiling American soldiers offering them food.

But that is not the end of the story. As Rabbi Levy explains, the term Holocaust "survivor" is not really appropriate for Louis. "Surviving" implies barely getting by. But that's not Louis. Louis didn't just get by. Louis Lived. Louis thrived. Undoubtedly, he was haunted by memories: being one of only nine people in a village of more than 400 to survive the war; losing both his parents to the Nazis; being forced to clear out the house of his beloved rabbi. ... But those painful memories didn't shape Louis's life. He was a regular attendee in his synagogue every Shabbat. For a time, Louis was the one who gave out candy to children.

On the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his liberation, Louis and his wife Dina helped dedicate a monument in Seeshaupt. At the ceremony, he read words from the book of Psalms:

The cords of death encompassed me, the grave held me in its grip. ... But God has delivered me from death. ... בארצות החיים ה' אתהלך לפני ה', I shall walk before the Lord in the Land of the living (Psalm 116:3, 9).

We all know people like Louis: survivors who have pledged to live; people who tell their stories in such inspirational ways; people who endured unspeakable tragedy and somehow chose life.

I'm thinking also of our members Roy and Adele Igersheim, who made it a mission to teach people from the small village of Igersheim, Germany, about the Jews who once lived there. They didn't just tell how the Jews died, though. They taught how Jews lived. They visited schools, commissioned plaques, and created relationships. In many cases, Roy and Adele were the first Jews these folks met. They invited them for Shabbat dinner. They explained *kiddush* and *challah* and overly-sweet wine. *Vachai bahem*, nearly 80 years after the Shoah, this is how we live.

Living begins with giving.

Rabbi Michael Gold tells a story of a man who dreamt he saw a house giving off a great deal of light. When he walked into the house, he saw all sorts of candles all over the place. Some of the candles were burning bright, some were dim, some were almost flickering out. He found the keeper of the house and asked, "What is this?"

The keeper replied, "Each candle is a different soul living in the world. The ones burning bright are in the prime of life; the flickering ones represent people who are dying. When the candle goes out, the person dies."

The keeper of the candles turned his back for a moment and the man quickly searched for his own candle. He found the candle with his name flickering in the corner, as if it was about to go out. The man panicked and started to take oil from another candle, but a hand stopped him. "That's not how it works here. Your candle does not burn brighter when you take oil from someone else. On the contrary, your candle burns brighter when you give oil to someone else." The man picked up his flickering candle and poured oil into several other vessels. When he put it down, his flame burned brighter. And the man awoke from his dream.

Giving can be a form of receiving. That is one interpretation of the first fruits that were to be brought to the ancient Temple on Shavuot. The Torah says: "*v'lakachta*, you shall take from the first fruits of the land." We would expect the Torah to say "you shall bring" the first fruits, or "you shall give" them; but it says "you shall take." Says the commentary Nachalat Kedumim: when you give something that important, when you share your good fortune with others, your act of giving becomes an act of receiving. Giving in an effort to repair a broken world ... that is choosing life.

We hear that sentiment from survivors of cancer or intimate partner violence. Giving to others can be part of the healing process. That is what a woman named Patricia said about her experience with chemotherapy for breast cancer. She had been ill for some time, and when her ordeal was finished, she sensed she needed to do something to help others. Patricia went out looking for a boat on which she could take families with disabilities sailing. It took two years to find the boat and another two years to have it remodeled to accommodate the disabilities. But when it was finally ready, Patricia was in her element. This was her path to healing.

Or Georgetta, a survivor of intimate partner violence. “If I help others,” she said, “I feel better, I heal. If I know that at least one other person won’t have to go through the same pain I went through. I feel that I am saving myself through saving them.”

We’ve heard stories in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian, of people who lost everything looking to help others. Like Mike Ross, a 29-year-old who had evacuated his Southwest Florida home to shelter with his parents. Mike was worried about his house, which was under 10 feet of water. But then he looked outside and saw a cat sitting all alone. The cat looked terrified and helpless, so Mike trudged through the rain to bring it to safety. At that time, Mike didn’t know what would happen to his own possessions. I’m sure he was scared. But his little act of kindness towards a helpless creature brought Mike comfort. In that moment of death and destruction, Mike Ross affirmed life.

In our tradition, *yizkor* and *tzedakah* are linked. As we remember, we pledge *tzedakah* to perpetuate loved ones’ values. We pray that our good deeds might help them, *b’ad hazkarat nishmoteihem*, that their souls might forever be remembered. And those deeds also benefit us, *b’ad hakamat nishmoteinu*, they lift our spirits and restore our sense of purpose and worth.

It doesn’t happen right away. “Healing is not something that is going to descend upon us from heaven,” to use Rabbi Levy’s words. “It is something we ... have to *fight* for.”

In a few Shabbats, we are going to read the story of Rebecca and Isaac. Like Sarah before her, Rebecca was barren. We read that “Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebecca conceived.” Now, it sounds like the response to Isaac’s prayer was immediate; Isaac was righteous, and he had a direct line to God. But if we read the verses more carefully, we see it was more complicated. Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebecca, and he was 60 when the twins were born. Isaac prayed for *twenty years*. And, surely, it wasn’t easy. I am sure there were times he wanted to give up. But Isaac persisted in his faith. And that is our mandate, too.

That was Moses’s final charge before Joshua succeeded him as leader of the Israelites. Moses said, “*Hazak ve-ematz*, Be strong and resolute, for you are the one who will accompany this people into the land.” *Hazak ve-ematz* means: don’t give up. Our Rabbis expounded: “If a person prays and sees that his prayers are not being answered, he should pray again.” *Hazak ve’ematz*. And we say the same about study and acts of kindness. It takes time for our efforts to make a difference. We must keep trying and moving and living.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav says this is an essential teaching of Judaism: “A person must be stubborn in the service of God. A person must determine to be strong and courageous (*lih’yot hazak v’amitz*) to maintain course even when forces cause him to fall again and again.” Righteous living requires persistence.

Last Sunday, I went to church. I was invited to Harvest Intercontinental Church in Olney to reflect on Jewish perspectives of the World As it Should Be, and that was my message. I spoke about Shabbat as a preview of the World to Come and reminded them of the commandment to observe Shabbat: “Six days you shall *work* ... and the seventh day shall be a Sabbath for God.” As our teacher

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel points out, the commandment is not just to rest. We are commanded to work the other six days, too. We work for six days *so that* we can rest on Shabbat.

And what is true of the weekly cycle is true for the ultimate Shabbat of the World as it Should Be. We must work with persistence to bring it about. As the Talmud teaches: “מי שטרח בערב שבת יאכל בשבת, Only one who labors before Shabbat will eat on Shabbat.” You can’t cook on Shabbat, and you can’t imagine the food will magically appear. And the same is true with healing ... ourselves and our world. Transformational change takes time and persistence, but it will come.

That is my prayer in this moment before Yizkor. As we remember our loved ones, as we face disillusionment and brokenness and loss, may God grant us the strength and the courage to live. May we summon the faith to imagine a brighter future and the determination to work to bring it about. May we soon experience the true joy our ancestors experienced as they danced together on Yom Kippur. May all our scarlet threads soon change over to white.

*G'mar Hatimah Tovah*, May we all be inscribed and sealed for good in the Book of Life. Amen.