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**Neilah Yom Kippur
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The Neilah That Almost Did Not Happen For Me

Friends,

It is Neilah—the end of Yom Kippur—one of the most poignant moments of our High Holy Day season-as we now ask to be sealed in the Book of Life for the year ahead. We know that nothing is necessarily guaranteed to us - so, understandably, our prayers assume added intensity. Once again, how grateful I am to my cherished colleague and long-time friend, Rabbi Michael Safra, for inviting me to share some thoughts with our B’nai Israel community as part of our Neilah service. I would also like to pause, as we all remember Rabbi Matthew Simon, zichrono livracha, who shaped our congregation in many ways and with whom I worked closely in my early years here.

It is no secret that I have always loved biking. For me it is both relaxing and rejuvenating. Often, I wrote my High Holy Day sermons—

at least in my head-as I navigated on my bike. One of my favorite bike adventures was with our son, David, one summer when he was studying at Georgetown Law. We spent three days exploring the backroads of the Shenandoah Valley—averaging about 40 miles each day. It was tiring to be sure but also exhilarating. We enjoyed it so much—that we did it again the next year with a different route.

When I spoke last year at Neilah, I could never have anticipated that just a few weeks later, on a gorgeous October afternoon, I would experience a near-catastrophic bike accident on the Capital Crescent Trail in Bethesda. The scenario that ensued was life changing: a serious traumatic brain injury, 4 days in an ICU unit, 10 days at an in-patient acute rehab, 3 months on crutches became my balance was so wobbly, excruciating, unrelenting headaches and many forms of follow-up therapy... but thanks to God, an extraordinary medical team, as well as the heartwarming emotional support of family, friends and our B’nai Israel community, I am here—after almost a full

year of recuperation-to tell the tale and to try and extract some meaning from this harrowing scenario.

So, what I have learned? Life is exceptionally fragile—even if you do not have a bike accident—and yet too often, we allow ourselves to be diverted, distracted, and thus fail to focus on the gift which is already ours. No one-no matter how capable and self-assured- can weather the inevitable challenges of our human journey alone. We all need the help, caring, and empathy of others to ease the really tough stuff which may assail us. And in the end, our own courage, resilience, faith, and sense of hope count for a lot.

While I was recuperating, I thought from time to time about a piece I had once read. It is called “To Hold with Open Arms,” and it was authored by Rabbi Milton Steinberg, one of the great writers and thinkers of our Conservative Movement in an earlier era.

While on a speaking tour across the United States, Rabbi Steinberg, still a relatively young man, suffered a devastating heart

attack.

This is what he writes:

“After that long illness, I was permitted for the first time to step out of doors. And, as I crossed the threshold, sunlight greeted me. This is my experience—all there is to it. And yet, so long, as I live, I shall never forget that moment. It was mid-January—a time of cold and storm up north, but in Texas, where I happened to be, a season much like our spring. The sky overhead was very blue, very clear, and very, very high. A faint wind blew from off the western plains, cool and yet somehow tinged with warmth—like a dry, chilled wine. And everywhere in the firmament above me, in the great vault between earth and sky, on the pavements, the buildings— the golden glow of the sunlight. It touched me, too, with friendship, with warmth, with blessing. And as I basked in its glory, there ran through my mind those wonder words of the prophet about the sun which some day shall rise with healing on its wings.

In that instant, I looked about me to see whether anyone else showed on his face the joy, almost the beatitude, I felt, But no, there they walked—men and women and children, in the glory of a golden flood, and so far as I could detect, there was none to give it heed. And then I remembered how often I, too, had been indifferent to sunlight, how often, preoccupied with petty and sometimes mean concerns, I had disregarded it. And I said to myself—how precious is the sunlight but, alas, how careless of it are men. How precious—how careless. This has been a refrain sounding in me ever since.

It rang in my spirit when I entered my own home again after months of absence, when I heard from a nearby room the excited voices of my children at play; when I looked once more, on the dear faces of some of my friends; when I was able for the first time to speak again from my pulpit in the name of our faith and tradition, to join in worship of the God who gives us so much of which we are so careless.

And a resolution crystallized within me. I said to myself that at the very first opportunity I would speak of this. I knew full well that it is a commonplace truth, that there is nothing clever about my private rediscovery of it, nothing ingenious about my way of putting it. But I was not interested in being original or clever or ingenious. I wanted only to remind my listeners, as I was reminded, to spend life wisely, not to squander it.”

Back to me:

Each morning, now, when I unglue my eyes from sleep and realize in that first awareness that I have been blessed with a new day, a rebirth, I quietly voice the words of our Jewish tradition:

Modeh ani l’fanekha, melekh hai v’kayam, she-hehezarta bi nishmati b’hemlah, rabah emunatekha.

“I thank you, God, that once again in your compassion, you have restored my soul. Great indeed is your faithfulness.”

There are endless opportunities to activate our human potential

each day—to draw on the Mitzvah system which is uniquely ours in Judaism and accessible to each of us. For us, as Jews, it is the framework to build a life of purpose, of consequence that transcends the trivialities of our everyday routine. Is it easy? Of course, not. It is a life-long quest – requiring focus, determination and vision.

Will there be moments of darkness and difficulty for each of us, when it feels as if the sun has been obliterated-exactly as I experienced in the aftermath of my bike accident when the road forward seemed so murky and frightening? Yes. But then for our inner mantra, let us call to mind an inspiring message imbedded in a song by Leonard Cohen:

“Ring the bells that still can ring,

Forget your perfect offering

There is a crack,

A crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in.”

And yes—in case you are wondering, October 24 is going to be my new “Alive Day.”