

**How Is This Night Different?**  
**Kol Nidrei 5760 (1999)**  
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Tonight is the night to ask ourselves a question we ordinarily reserve for a very different occasion: a time when we're feasting, not fasting; and celebrating rather than reflecting. The question is, "Mah Nishtanah?" "What's Different?" "What has changed?"

Tonight, though, we don't look at the external: at the table with certain foods on it (or, tonight, missing foods); we don't look at our posture (whether it be reclining or, this evening, doing a lot of standing). Instead, we look at and into ourselves: How are we different? How are we different from who we have been? How can we be different from who we are today?

Now for some of us, that's obvious. We look at our receding hairlines, or our expanding waistbands, or at some other feature of our physical form and we can see a change. We're getting older! Some of us may have recovered from serious illnesses; others of us may not be as well as we were this time last year. But this is the night to look at what cannot be seen, only sensed. Tonight we focus on our middot, our qualities, our character. We focus on our motivations, we focus on our habits, both good and bad, and we ask ourselves, "How have those changed?"

When we think about what really makes us tick, many of us would say that our character was formed when we were very young, and it hasn't changed for years and it isn't about to change. That's a very reasonable, though not particularly Jewish way of looking at things. We Jews have always taught, to the contrary, that education – moral education, not just intellectual – is an ongoing process throughout our lives. Twice a day we recite the Sh'ma, not to remember what it sounds like, but to reinforce its message. Not because we've "forgotten" it but because there's always more we can learn from it.

But this notion that I could be a different kind of person than I am, a different kind of Jew; this notion that I could take on certain mitzvot and live my life differently; that I could be less short-tempered, or be more generous; that I could become more observant, more mindful, more religious than I've been – this is not a notion we



generally take very seriously. Most of us find ourselves coasting along until a crisis comes along.

There is something new appearing in movie theatres these days; a commercial, much like the ones we see on our television sets. One particular commercial is very well made. It features black-and-white pseudo-newsreel footage to display dire headlines: "Asteroid Headed for the Planet Earth." "The world is coming to an end." People rush about in panic, as the earth faces impending doom. A comic, melodramatic sense of anxiety fills the screen as people rush about.

Finally, as the asteroid is about to strike earth, none other than Ken Griffey Jr., a star baseball player of the Seattle Mariners, picks up an enormous bat and smacks the asteroid out into the far reaches of outer space, saving the earth from certain destruction. Then, at the very end of the commercial, do we see the label on his sneakers, the symbol of a certain corporation and do we thereby learn who is actually paying for this ad.

What makes the commercial so amusing is that we get to see folks behaving in ways they ordinarily don't. Once everyone really becomes convinced that the world is coming to an end, all sorts of things happen: There is one scene showing a whole bunch of teenage girls rushing into an ice-cream parlor to order sundaes!

The premise of the commercial is the obvious truth that we don't behave the way we would if we knew that there would be no tomorrow. If we were on a diet, we would go out and eat one more sundae, if we were working up the nerve to do something, we would go out and do it.

Obviously, the main message the advertisers want to convey is that, if things really got tough, you'd want to be wearing a certain brand of sneakers.

I suppose that when most folks see that commercial, they think about sneakers. When I saw it, I thought about Pirkei Avot. According to Rabbi Eliezer, who's quoted in Pirkei Avot, if you knew that an asteroid was on its way, you should have more than ice cream on your radar screen. Your agenda should include teshuvah, repentance, as well. As he puts it, "Repent one day before your death."

Well, if you knew that tomorrow was to be your last day, what would you do? Would you forget about emptying the dishwasher? Or taking out the garbage? Would you stop going to work? Would you just head off on that cruise you've always dreamed about? How would we live our lives if we were truly aware of our fragility, our vulnerability?

Now, before we start answering those questions, there is a distinction between that commercial and the work Rabbi Eliezer would have us do, the work that this day beckons us to do. In the commercial, the world is coming to an end. For Rabbi Eliezer, it's not the world, but our individual lives that we imagine coming to an end.

If the world were coming to an end, you could argue that none of our actions would have consequences. But if we believe that our families, our communities, the Jewish people, all humanity will outlive us, that raises the stakes for our choices. For one thing, we're less likely to decide to stop doing laundry if we believe that our families will outlive us.

A colleague of mine, Rabbi Steven Leder, wrote a wonderful book called "The Extraordinary Nature of Ordinary Things." In it he describes one day in his life, his 37th birthday. Beforehand, people kept asking him, "What are your plans?" and his response was always, "Nothing much."

And in truth, he admits, he really didn't do anything all that special on his birthday. He played street hockey with his son in front of the house. He opened up some presents: a shirt, a tie, a grape lollipop from his son's private stash. Then it was off to the mall to exchange the shirt for a larger one (he had gained some weight), some pizza and back home. He and his wife cancelled the babysitter and spent a quiet evening at home. A gentle end to an ordinary day.

It was, as he put it, a day in which he did "Nothing Much." But as he went through the next day, in which he became yet again aware of how much tzuris there is in the world, he realized how many people hunger for the simple pleasures of work, family and human love, of backyard hockey games and hugs, and macaroni and cheese. "Thank God," he writes, "for days filled with nothing much at all. Nothing much is more than enough."

The question really is, What in our lives is meaningful, enduring, worthwhile? Are we devoting enough time to those endeavors? Sometimes we deceive ourselves. This is the time to address these questions honestly. Are we devoting enough time to ourselves, our families, our friends, our communities? Are we helping those less fortunate than ourselves? Are we making a difference in the world? Are we helping to make the world, which we hope will endure long after our deaths, to become more humane, peaceful, and loving?

Franz Kafka once said, "The meaning of life is that it ends."

None of us is as talented as Ken Griffey. We can't prevent the world from coming to an end. We can't even prevent our own lives from coming to an end.

Having said that, Yom Kippur gives us, as it were, a second chance at life. As we move through this very unusual day, we will withdraw from our usual roles and simulate our own deaths: we don't eat, we don't drink, we refrain from intimate relations, we don't wear leather shoes. We wear white – reminiscent of the shrouds in which we'll one day be buried – and we descend into a time outside of life.

And then, following Yom Kippur, we get a second chance. Tomorrow evening, the gates open again into a new year. Yom Kippur allows us to live out Rabbi Eliezer's scenario – if we in fact choose, this evening, to listen to his words.

All of us know that the end of our life is one year closer than it was last year. That is a fact. But we don't have to lament that fact, if we commit ourselves to living our lives the way we know we should live them.

Living life in the shadow of our own deaths needn't be gloomy. A shadow is a cool protected area. You can see clearer sometimes in a shadow than in the glare of the sun.

Let us look clearly into the future and live meaningful, joyful lives, free of regret and distress. Let's answer that question, "Mah Nishtanah?" by saying, "It is we who have changed and will continue to change."

May all of us be privileged to enjoy a "Shanah Tovah", literally, a "change for the good," in the coming year.

Amen.