One of the greatest detective thrillers of all time, *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett, just happened to be around the house several weeks ago. I kept passing it as I went back and forth between my study and the coffee maker in the kitchen, so I eventually picked it up and—well, as they say—I couldn’t put it down. Now, although die-hard Humphrey Bogart fans probably consider the film version of that book to be definitive, there is a story told in the novel which didn’t make it onto the screen but which sheds some light on some of the important questions of Yom Kippur.

The story is about a man who disappeared. His life had been, or so it seemed, perfectly in order. He lived in Tacoma, Washington; he had a wife, two children, a job, a house and a car. He played golf every day at 4:00 in the afternoon. And then, one day, he disappeared. He just dropped out of sight. For five years there was no trace of him. Then someone told his wife that a man who looked an awful lot like her husband had been sighted in Spokane, not too far away. So she hired a private detective—as it turns out, Sam Spade, the protagonist of the novel—and Sam found him. Sure enough, he was living there under an assumed name. He had a different job, he was married to a different woman and he was raising different kids.

“What gives?” asked Sam Spade. “Why did you do it?”

Going to lunch one day, the man said, he had passed a construction site where a building was going up. Suddenly, a steel beam dropped from the sky and crashed into the sidewalk right next to him. It missed him, but when it hit the sidewalk, a tiny piece of it flew up and hit him in the cheek. It only scratched his skin, but the man explained to Sam Spade that he realized at that moment that he could be wiped out between office and restaurant by the accident of a falling beam.

So what did he do? He saw that his life could be ended at random by a falling beam, and so he decided to change his life at random by simply going away. He just walked out and started over again. Over time, though, things settled into the
same routine. He even found time, during the season, to play golf every day at 4:00 in the afternoon.

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What’s that story about? It seems to be a story about a man who—as a result of a near-death experience—decides that it’s essential that he change his life, so he goes out and does just that.

But he didn’t change at all! He changed his name, but that was about it. Every thing else was a mirror image of what it had been before.

This story seems contrary to our expectations. Don’t we imagine that a near-death experience is bound to change us, and dramatically, for the better?

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We don’t have to go to a fifty-year-old story. We can just open up the newspaper.

A few weeks ago [NY Times, 9/10/03], there was a story in the paper [by Michael Luo, p. A16] about the employees of the American Bureau of Shipping, a small company with an office in New York City. There’s a photo of the group accompanying the article. They look like a typical group of American workers: three are women; six are men. Several are black; one is East Asian; the rest are white. Until September 11, 2001, the group was just another ordinary collection of office workers. On that morning, this group was in their office on the 91st floor of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. When the airplane hit their tower, the group managed to pull itself together and escape together down the one passable stairwell. All of them got out.

What they didn’t learn until later was that no one from any of the floors above them escaped. No one. The group came to realize that “in the North Tower of the World Trade Center, they represented the line between life and death.” Had the plane come in at a slightly different angle, not one of them would have survived.

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How did these real, live people respond when they realized that their lives could have come to an end in an instant, with no warning whatsoever? Did it make them better people? Change their lives? Transform them?
Well, for some, maybe it did; and for others, maybe it didn’t.

One woman concluded that, “God must have had reasons for sparing her.” A colleague of hers had “the opposite response. Organized religion had never sat well with him. Now, he had even less use for it.”

During the two years since their narrow escape, some of these men and women have gone out of their way to try to be nicer to their kids. Others claim that they have deliberately chosen to refrain from making any changes. On this most recent anniversary of 9/11, some went to Ground Zero. Others stayed away.

This real-life event seems to confirm the truth of that strange story told in The Maltese Falcon: People can get shaken-up by a life threatening experience. It may even inspire them to make dramatic changes in their lives. But it doesn’t necessarily change them inside: it doesn’t necessarily inspire them to make the kind of changes that we would include within the notion of teshuvah.

Sometimes, shaking a person up accomplishes nothing more than—well—shaking him up.

Why is that?

Maybe because, if we wait for a beam to fall out of the sky, we’ve waited too long. And our response may be inadequate, even pointless. Not connected with what it is we really want to or ought to change.

Not just once in our lives, but once each and every year our tradition insists that we not experience, but simulate a near-death experience. We stop eating. We confess our sins—as we’re supposed to do on our deathbeds. We wear white, the color of the shrouds in which we are to be buried.

We do all this in the context of a day of liturgical recitations designed to get us thinking not about superficial change, but about real change, teshuvah. Our mahzor reminds us, again and again, of what it is we should stop doing: gossiping and lying and cheating and acting deceitfully, etc., etc. Each of us is bound to find within those long lists one or two items that touch us deeply; one or two items that we know we need to work on. And we are reminded of what we should be doing: sharing our bread with the hungry, fighting injustice, caring for the homeless, relieving the distress of the wretched, delighting in Shabbat. (I hope that everyone will be here and listening closely to that extraordinary passage from Isaiah that we
will read as our haftarah tomorrow.) (See Isaiah 57:14–58:14.) We all know that we can and should be doing more than we are.

Yom Kippur is designed to get us to make the kind of morally compulsory changes we should be making—not the kind of personal choices we may or may not impulsively make in the wake of some catastrophic event.

Sometimes I wonder—I’m probably not alone in doing so—when we gather together at services on the High Holidays, do we take the words of our mahzor to heart, or do we merely hear words? Do we come away from this experience resolved to be different, or no different than when we arrived?

Let me put it differently, in the language of accounting: as most of us are aware, if you receive a benefit in exchange for a charitable contribution, you can’t deduct the full amount of the contribution as a donation. You have to subtract the value of the benefit received to determine your tax deduction.

But there is an interesting exception to this policy. When the benefit is a so-called “intangible religious benefit,” it needn’t be deducted from the amount contributed. So, for example, if you purchased tickets to attend High Holiday services, or if your membership includes free High Holiday tickets, my understanding is that you are entitled—and please, I am not an accountant; consult professional advice before you fill out your tax return—you are entitled to deduct the full amount of the tickets as a charitable deduction—even though you may feel that you’ve gained from the experience. Everyone in this room is presumed by the IRS to be receiving merely an intangible religious benefit, from being here. Nothing more substantive than that.

But never mind the IRS! Our tradition doesn’t just want us to come away with an intangible benefit! It wants us to receive a tangible religious benefit! It wants us to resolve to be better than we were yesterday! And the question is, Is that happening? Are we taking the words to heart? Are we allowing them to penetrate our souls? When we leave, can we point to specific, concrete ways in which the experience has changed our lives?

Change—real change—is difficult. It’s the hardest thing we could possibly try to do. That’s why, each and every year, we read the same words and hear the same messages. However hard we try, we’re still selfish, we’re still smug, we’re still callous, we’re still deceitful. How many years ago did Isaiah preach? Was it 2,500 years ago? We Jews have been listening to his words every year since then. And yet, there are still poor people. There is still oppression. We haven’t solved those
social problems he identified so long ago and which are at the root of so much suffering even today.

Why do we recite Kol Nidre? Probably because we know that, even if we may leave services with good intentions, it is also true that we may abandon our enthusiasm before too long. As a poem by Ze’ev Falk which is in our mahzor puts it, “In moments of weakness, we do not remember the promises we made on Atonement Day.”

How can we confront this internal back-sliding? One way, curiously, is to observe faithfully the mitzvah to remember the Exodus from Egypt, “kol y’mei khayeinu,”—all the days of our lives—which our tradition teaches us means, each and every morning and each and every evening.

That may seem like a non sequitur, more appropriate to Pesach than to Yom Kippur. Why should remembering twice a day—which we do, incidentally, when we recite the vayomer paragraph in the Sh’ma—why should remembering that we were once slaves, and now we’re free, help us?

Reminding ourselves that we are free reminds us that there should be nothing holding us back from living the most moral lives possible. We are free. Free to make the right choices: to be humane rather than selfish, to care rather than to ignore, to love rather than to hate our fellow human beings. And we’re free to do this each and every day. The choices we made yesterday do not condemn us to (or excuse us from choosing to) make the same choices today.

Making these kinds of choices is more than just choosing where to play golf at 4:00 every afternoon. It’s choosing how to live a life that matters. And we can make those kinds of choices.

We blow the shofar for many reasons, but perhaps the most important of them is, in order to wake us up. We shouldn’t need to have a steel beam fall down in front of us. It wouldn’t necessarily help, anyway! We shouldn’t need, God forbid, to have to flee from a burning building in order to realize how we’re supposed to live, in order to realize that we can and should start doing the right thing now, and not wait until tomorrow.

Let’s not wait.

Yes, there is randomness in the world. There’s always been randomness. But let’s not wait for it to invade our lives and to knock us off stride. Instead, let’s vow to
change our lives—not superficially, not randomly, but purposefully. Let’s start as soon as we can. Let’s not wait to live lives of caring and concern.

As early as today, let’s strive to be a blessing to those around us.

Amen.