

**“Why Are You Here?”**  
**Kol Nidre - October 9, 2008**  
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It’s a very old Jewish custom to visit the cemetery during the month of Elul and between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. At the cemetery, it’s hard not to think about the fact that we will all end up there. As the old saying goes, “Nobody gets out of here alive.” Reflecting on our mortality—which the cemetery inspires—can spur us to review our behavior, reflect on our deficiencies and resolve to address them.

But, as we all know, you don’t have to go to the cemetery to start reflecting along those lines.

A few months ago, about a week into my summer vacation, I got a wake-up call. Literally. I am usually up early, but for some reason not that morning. It was one of those extremely rare days when I was hoping to sleep late. It was a case of, “Friday, the rabbi intended to sleep late.” Only I never got the chance. It was my doctor on the other end of the line, telling me that I needed surgery.

Now, I don’t want to overdramatize this. I needed surgery, I underwent surgery and now I’m recovering from it. I know I’m very fortunate. Many in our congregation have encountered—or are currently experiencing—a lot more tsuris than I have. Nevertheless, my experience highlighted some of the issues that you and I have the opportunity to confront each and every High Holiday season.

For example, there’s that wake-up call. Long before there were telephones, the shofar was a wake up call. How does the Rambam put it? “Awake, ye sleepers from your slumber; rouse yourselves from your lethargy.” The blast of the shofar is a call to each and every one of us to be awake. To be alert. To be prepared. “For what?” you may ask. Well, that’s exactly the point. For the unexpected.

Our liturgy reminds us that our lives can change “like that;” that the many assumptions that we constantly make—say, that we’re going to be O.K. tomorrow, that our loved ones are going to be O.K., even that we’re O.K. today—they’re just



assumptions. They may be based on good statistical data, but they're not certainties.

Every day, we begin our prayers with a simple statement. (Incidentally, when we teach kids how to pray, it's one of the first lines we teach them.) "Modeh ani lifanecha," it begins. "Thank you, God," we say, "she-he-che-zartah bi nishmati b'chemlah"—"for restoring my soul to me" in love.

What does this simple statement do? It teaches us not to take our souls for granted. It reminds us that a day is coming when our souls won't be restored. (Maybe soon; maybe years from now.) And at night, such as this very evening, we say, as we did just a few minutes ago, the Hashkiveinu, in which we pray for God to "raise us up again unto life" the next morning.

The awareness of our fragility and our mortality is a theme that runs throughout the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur liturgy, especially in the Selichot section of the service, which we just recited.

"Enosh kekhatzir yamav, k'tzitz ha-sadeh keyn yatzitz."

The days of a human being are like grass;

We flourish like flowers in the field.

The wind passes over us, and we are gone;

And no one can recognize where we once were. (p. 390)

Or what about "Ki Hinei Ka-Khomer"? "We are like clay in the hands of the potter, to be thickened or thinned as he wishes." And the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, that we'll recite tomorrow morning, compares us to an "easily broken clay vessel," "a passing shadow, a fleeting cloud, ... a vanishing dream."

Of all our prayers, the Unetaneh Tokef ("On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed") probably most inspires the fear and trepidation that a wake-up call can bring. It is intended to get into our kishkas, to stir us deeply within. It powerfully reminds us that nothing in life is certain, except for the fact that we came from dust and our end is dust (adam ysodo me-afar v'sofu me-afar). None of us knows who, in the coming year, will live and who will die, who will be at rest and who will be afflicted.

A word about the Unetaneh Tokef. It is one of the most misunderstood prayers in our liturgy. If we read it as a news story instead of as a poem, we might understand it to suggest that we are responsible for whatever sickness or pain or suffering may come upon us. God forbid. I don't believe that that is the prayer's intent at all; if it were, I couldn't recite it. I think its purpose is to shake us up, to confront us with our own mortality in order to inspire us to do what we should be doing with our lives, namely, teshuvah, tefillah and tsedakah—repentance, prayer, and acts of piety.

For Jews, sickness is not about sin. Sickness is a challenge and we turn to doctors who are partners with God to care for us and, if possible, heal us.

There's the old joke about the three friends—a Frenchman, a German and a Jew—who are lost in the desert and run out of water.

"I'm so thirsty," says the Frenchman. "I must have wine." "I'm so thirsty," says the German. "I must have beer." "I'm so thirsty," says the Jew. "I must have diabetes."

We Jews care about our health. We know we are made of flesh, and flesh is susceptible to disease. When a Jew is sick, he doesn't first go to the rabbi, he goes to the doctor.

On the morning of my surgery, I moved through one section after another in a pre-op room on the way to the operating room. I realized that the room I was in was a "one-way room." I and the others who were scheduled for surgery that day were headed in one direction: we all came in from the general waiting area and, one by one, we all went out toward the operating room.

According to the author of the Unetaneh Tokef we are like bnei maron, like individuals steadily making our way on a narrow mountain pass, moving single file through life. Life moves in only one direction, and that is forward.

In the movie 'Déjà vu', Denzel Washington plays a character who is able to see into the past and observe exactly what was going on four days previously. He then discovers that he can actually enter into that scene and alter the course of events. That's probably been a fantasy of human beings since the beginning of time. Our liturgy gently reminds us: that's just a fantasy; there are no "do-overs."

We have but one chance to live this day and every day. That is why, I think, we sing that song "Hayom" that closes the Shaharit service with such gusto. Today is the day that we can influence; not yesterday.

There's that saying, attributed to William Penn, "If there is any Kindness I can show, or any good thing I can do to any fellow human being, let me do it now [hayom!]  
—and not defer or neglect it, as I shall not pass this way again."

There's also that Phil Ochs song, "When I'm Gone":

There's no place in this world where I'll belong when I'm gone

And I won't know the right from the wrong when I'm gone

And you won't find me singin' on this song when I'm gone

So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here [– in other words, hayom!]

As I was going through pre-op procedures, each nurse asked me essentially the same three questions: "What's your name?" "What's your date of birth?" and "What procedure are you having this morning?" These questions are designed, I learned, to minimize the risk of errors.

One nurse asked her questions a little differently. Like the others, she asked me my name and my date of birth, but then she turned to me and asked, "Why are you here?" I had already begun preparing for the High Holidays, so that question knocked me flat. "Why are you here?" That is, indeed, the question, isn't it?

"Why was I there?" I took that question very seriously.

Well, first of all, I was there for a particular operation, and I was careful to recite its name properly to her.

More profoundly, I was there because I wanted to live. Being in that gleaming pre-op room (I never got to see the operating room, but I'm sure it's equally spotless), I realized that I was being given a precious opportunity that would not have been made available to me had I lived only a few generations ago. I was there because I was fortunate enough to have access to the finest medical care in the world—care that the vast number of people who've ever lived, even the vast number of people alive today, can only dream of—and I wanted the benefit of that care.

But that question, "Why are you here?" is even deeper. That nurse was asking me the same question we should be asking ourselves every day: Why am I here? What am I here to accomplish? What am I doing with my life to justify it?

I heard that nurse ask me, in essence, “What have I done lately to deserve being alive?”

So why are we here?

There’s that incredibly sappy song in *The Sound of Music*, “I must have done something good.” But I think that the religious answer—or, at least, the answer of Yom Kippur—is a different one: Life is not a quid pro quo. It’s not about what we did. It’s that life itself and all its blessings are gifts to the undeserving.

We did absolutely nothing to deserve our lives. What could any of us ever have done to deserve the incredible gift of life? As our liturgy asks, “Mah Anu?”—“What are we, after all?” “Meh hayeinu?” “What is the worth of our lives?” “Meh hasdeinu?” “How kind are we, really?” These powerful words that we recited this evening and that we’ll recite again before this holy day is done bring us down to the level of the dust from which we are formed.

And so we throw ourselves on God’s mercy. Remember that last stanza of the *Avinu Malkeinu*, that we just recited: “Have mercy on us, respond to us—honeinu va-aneinu—even though ein banu ma-asim—we have no deeds with which to justify ourselves.”

And yet, on the other hand—and this is the other great theme of the prayers we are about to recite—we have the potential to be worthy of God’s mercy. All we need to do is to recognize that and to respond appropriately. As it says in the *Unetaneh Tokef*, “ad yom moto tikhakeh lo”: God waits for us until the day of our deaths. What is God waiting for? He’s waiting for us to act in the world with justice, with mercy, with truth and with goodness.

I felt that human potential for goodness during my recovery. I felt buoyed every time I received a note, or an email or a get well card; every time cookies or flowers or chocolates or a meal appeared at our home. A few days ago, I visited someone in our congregation who just had surgery. It warmed my heart to see him wrapped in a shawl provided by the Temple Aliyah Hesed Committee. I too had received such a shawl during my convalescence. How cozy it felt to sit wrapped in that shawl. I was curious to know who made it, but there was a certain appeal in not knowing. I can’t but feel appreciative to every one of our knitters, any one of whom could have been the one to knit that particular shawl.

To make this a good world, we need each other and God needs us. As we chant at the end of the piyyut (poem), *Ki Anu Amecha*, “Anu ma’amirecha v’atah

ma'amireinu.”—“We testify on your behalf; and You, God, testify on ours.” Only we can be God’s partners in this world. God needs us to make the world a better place. God needs us to fight evil, to treat illness, to fight poverty and hunger, to bring comfort to the sick or the bereaved or the lonely or the oppressed. That is the great challenge of living as a human being in the world: to take the mortal raw materials of which we are made, and to try to do something positive with them—every day.

Only we can do that. “Why are you here?” We know the answer to that question.

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Undergoing surgery made the words of the Yom Kippur liturgy come alive for me earlier this year than usual.

But we don’t need surgery to have that experience. Yom Kippur is, for each one of us, a near-death experience. We stop eating, we wear white, we spend the day in synagogue and then, when we’re so depleted we think we can’t take it any more, at the end of Neilah when the shofar blows, we are, as it were, re-born, ready to live our lives again.

Let the High Holiday prayers we recite on this day be our wake up call. Let them inspire us to take stock of our lives, and to articulate an answer, an honest answer, to the question, “Why are you here?”—and to act on that answer.

May the coming year be a healthy and a blessed one for every one of us. Amen.