

# Life Hanging in the Balance

**Sermon by Rabbi George Gittleman**  
**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770**

Before I went to rabbinical school, rock climbing was my religion and my community. Really; I went to Yosemite almost every weekend. I would meet my buddies along the way – we all had VW buses... I was the only one without a tool box in mine, and I never needed to use one! It was a community of young men and women who spent all our spare time training (working out), fantasizing or talking about climbing a rock, or, when we were lucky, actually climbing. This is a story from that time in my life – over 20 years ago.

We were in Tuolumne Meadows, Tom and I. Tuolumne Meadows is almost 9,000 feet above sea level. It has beautiful rock domes. Many of you can picture it, or if you can picture Half Dome, that is like the domes in Tuolumne. It was early summer when, because of the high altitude, the weather is unpredictable.

One beautiful, clear, morning me and my partner Tom set out to climb a new route – we'd actually seen others up there, we'd heard about it and we'd read about it, but never climbed it ourselves. We spent months fantasizing and preparing for this. We left on Friday night with all the traffic...illegally camped, which a lot of rock climbers do because you can't get a camping permit...true confessions! We got up at 4:30 in the morning, got our gear together, and hiked to the base of the dome.

It was awesome to behold – I mean just a *beautiful* crack system in the rock that rose up about 350 feet up into a roof, an overhang, and then you move under the overhang (this big roof), and then you have to make your way over it, and then there is another 400 feet or so of vertical climbing, but the crux is really getting over the roof.

It is beautiful, these vertical scenes are so beautiful, you can't imagine it unless you are a rock climber. And we are in this crack system and we have been climbing together for years, and it is going so smoothly; we don't really have to speak, we just move. I will confess that once we hit the roof I was a little afraid. Most of my climbing life I wasn't afraid, but once I hit this big roof I felt how high up we were, and I realized we had to traverse now...over and somehow make it through this overhang; a little fear crept in.

It was Tom's turn though to be on the sharp of the rope, to go first. I was happy, we had planned it this way because we knew each other and we knew who would be afraid where. Traverses are actually quite treacherous because as you move across the issue is you swing and swinging means the possibility of scraping or being impaled on any rocks that are jutting out from the face of the cliff.

So he does the traverse, and he does just fine. He gets to the overhang and there is a little break in the roof and he can kind of worm his way into it and over, and he makes it to the other side and he yells, I can actually hear him, and he pulls on the rope twice which is the sign that says

he's up there, and he pulls the slack out of the rope. I make the traverse, which is scary going both ways because I also swing some. And we make it up over the roof, and we basically think that we made it, the crux is over, there is about 400 more feet of vertical climbing to go, it was kind of a vertical gully, it was pretty easy and it was all gravy. For us it would be just a lot of fun, a beautiful day, at least it was when we started.

What we hadn't noticed because we were so caught up in what we were doing is that big cumulus clouds had set in, the wind was picking up, and in a moment it began to thunder and lightning, and then rain, and then hail, and then sleet and we were in shorts and tee shirts; we instantly knew we were in trouble.

So what do you do? The problem with this kind of climb is that you can't actually reverse your steps because you can't reverse the traverse. Perhaps you have seen a picture or a film with climber's running back and forth on the side of the rock... have you seen that in pictures? It is very hard to go back when there is a traverse. We didn't think we could just wait to be rescued because we feared we would die of hypothermia and I am not sure that we made the right decision, but at that moment it was clear to us that we couldn't stay. That gully was like a river, it was pouring with water, it was really cold, and we were really wet. So we made a quick decision, and that was that our only hope of not freezing to death up there was to go straight down. That means to repel straight down. Repelling is not a big deal, but we didn't know what was down there. We traversed and went up, we didn't know what was down. All we could hope was that there was another route that we would run into that had something fixed in the rock to tie ourselves to, or someone else had also had to escape, like us, and had left us a path down. That was all we knew and it was my turn to go first.

So I am now on what is called "the sharp end of the rope" and I repel down about a 100 feet of so, and I am hanging now 500 feet above the ground. I am swinging a little bit back and forth looking for a ledge, looking for something in the rock, looking for some way to attach myself so I can bring him down and we can continue down. I am getting scared because the rope is 150 feet long. I had tied a knot in the end so I wouldn't repel off the end of the rope, but still I am getting close to the end of the rope. So I am going down, down, down, down, down, and right at the very end of the rope I see two "bolts" with little hangers that had been put in the rock, I don't know how long ago. At first I was elated! I saw these two bolts and I said, "Great! Someone like us, had had this experience, or this was someone else's route. I am going to just get over to those bolts, I am going to clip into them and we are going to get out of here and be fine."

So I got over to the bolts and I look at them, and they are very rusty. When I clipped into the first one I thought, "Okay one little bolt in a rock 350 feet off the ground is not much to hang your life onto." It was rusty, and the second one was what we call a "spinner." The little clip that you can hook into, it would spin which meant that it had been pulled out over time. What am I going to do? I couldn't go back up. It is freezing cold. It's raining, sleeting, hailing. My hands are getting numb, and I am in a tee shirt and shorts 9,000 feet above sea level in the High Sierras. So I clip myself into both these bolts, I don't put my weight on them yet. I look at them and think, "I don't know, maybe." But, eventually I ease my weight onto them and they hold. And then I have to untie from the rope because Tom needs to pull the rope through in order for him to

come down. So, I lean on the belay (the bolts in the rock that I am tied into), I untie from the rope and... I am still there.

I pull on the rope twice... Tom comes down. We are not able to communicate to each other. It is howling, it is nasty and we are freezing. So, Tom comes repelling down, and he is looking down as he comes and he sees my face, and he sees the bolts, and at first he has this big smile. And then he looks at me again, and he sees the look on my face. And he doesn't say a word. We didn't need to talk about this. He just looks at me, and I look at him. He comes right next to me. We look at these two bolts. I am hanging on, and soon he is going to be hanging on. He clips into one; he still has his weight on the rope. He looks at me again. I look at him. He clips into the other bolt. We still have the rope holding us, but he has to pull the rope through. Now we both have our weight on these two bolts. We are still there.

He pulls the rope down. We are hanging on these two rusty bolts, one of them is a spinner! We are not talking to each other, we don't need to talk. We are very quiet and very still.

And now, we have to do it again, and this time it is his turn. And every time you shift you are worried that you will pull the bolt out. But you have to move around a bit. So we shift, and every move we wonder, "Are we going to live, or are we going to die?"

To make a long story short... We made it down that day. There was no great celebration... Latter I will admit we had more than a few beers. But not to party actually, but rather to numb the terror we had experienced. Not so much of our near death but rather of seeing our lives so clearly, so awesomely hanging in the balance.

That's why I'm sharing this story tonight because it encapsulates what the Holy Days are all about – facing the fact that our lives are always, whether we recognize it or not, hanging in the balance.

Towards the beginning of the service this evening we read as we always do one of two scant references to Rosh Hashanah in our Makhzor:

"B'chodesh hashvi'i... In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, there shall be a sacred assembly, a cessation from work, a day of commemoration proclaimed by the sounding of the Shofar"

So what is that all about? Why did our ancient Israelite ancestors have this big day of commemoration on the seventh month, three or four thousand years ago? The calendar has changed by the way; the seventh month then is now this month, the month of Tishrei. I will tell you why: the Egyptians had the Nile, the Babylonians had the Tigris and the Euphrates; but Israel was completely dependent on rain. And what month did the rains come? They came... not in the seventh month, but in the eighth month. So the seventh month was a time when the nation of Israel felt its life hanging in the balance. Remember, there was no National Water Carrier in Israel 3,000 years ago; if it didn't rain, they starved.

In fact, if we ask the meta question – why are we here, what are these Holy Days all about? One timeless response is that like our ancient brothers and sisters, our lives too hang in the balance, all the time. And this is the time of year in the Jewish calendar when we are asked to really face it.

Some one here has a loved one fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan; others have relatives and friends in the Israeli army. Many in our community have lost jobs and homes. It has been a hard year for people, in our community and of course in our country. Many are concerned about their health, and our health care system. You know, there are hungry people in our community, people who are struggling to feed their families, Jewish families, from week to week. Jewish Family and Children Services has never had this much need for food to give to people.

And even if you don't feel the anxious tug of one or another imminent threat to you or your family, you know if you are honest, that all our lives are like the weather in the High Sierras, things change and fast, unpredictably, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

All our lives hang in the balance all the time, whether we are aware of it or not.

This is the main point of Rabbi Alan Lew's book (may his memory be for a blessing) about the Holy Days, [This Is Real And You Are Totally Unprepared](#). It is a great title! Some of you may have known Rabbi Lew. He was on his way to becoming a Buddhist Monk, almost there, and then he got more involved in his Jewish life, and became a Conservative rabbi instead. He was actually a rabbi in Santa Rosa for awhile, he served Congregation Beth Ami. He served congregation Beth Sholom in San Francisco for over a decade. He came and taught at Shomrei Torah a number of times, including at Bible By The Bay last year. He died jogging two months after he was at Shomrei Torah. He was at a conference, went for a jog, had a heart problem, had a heart attack...young man, gone.

I now want to read a little from his book in his memory but also because... well you will see: "Please imagine this: You are out for a social evening with those very close to you, family or close friends or both. The evening begins with a wonderful dinner, and then, out of some vague sense — or perhaps a very strong sense — of family tradition and obligation, you all go off after dinner to participate in a basically empty religious ritual. Or perhaps you are by yourself but you attend this empty ritual because you have very pleasant associations of having done so with your family and friends back in Cleveland or Detroit or New Jersey. Or perhaps it is not so empty for you.... Or perhaps you feel very little, but every year you harbor the hope that you will feel something this time."

And he goes on and gives many examples, and basically he is saying...Imagine you come here tonight, but things look a little different. And the one assumption he is making is that all of us come with different expectations but none of us take it as seriously as it really is.

"But this time as you enter the sanctuary, everything feels different. So you look more closely. There are three immense books at the head of the sanctuary. A presence can be felt in the room so palpably you can almost see it; it hovers over the table like a colloid suspension, a smoky mist. Now you hear a deep, disembodied voice calling out names, and every time a name is called, it is written in one of the books. There is no hand, there is no quill; the pages of the book simply rustle and then quiver, and when the rustling stops, the name is already written. It is

written in the Book of Life, while sighs of relief go up all around the room; or it is written in the Book of Death, while a cold silence grips the sanctuary, amid much shuddering of shoulders and the sudden sucking in of breath; or it is written in the book of the intermediaries, those who will spend the next ten days in a state of suspended judgment, in the process of transformation, after which they will be entered into one of the other two books. All of a sudden you hear your own name being called, and you want to cry out, No! No! No! Not now! I didn't realize this was real... Please give me some more time. Let me do something to affect the outcome of all this. But the voice continues to intone your name and there is a rustling of the pages of the books, and your heart is gripped with terror as you wait to see in which one your name will be inscribed.” (pp. 99-101)

Woah... The Book of Life and Death, a central theme of these Holy Days which we don't generally like very much... We especially struggle with the prayer we will recite tomorrow and on the day of Yom Kippur that plays it out so horribly and so vividly every year – “Un'tane tokef k'dushat hayom..... Who shall live and who shall die, who by fire and who by water...”

This past year there was a whole article in the Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal (you should all get it, you'll love it!) that dealt with the challenges rabbis face with this prayer. A whole journal just on what rabbis do with this prayer! Certainly over the years many of you have seen me struggle with it. I always cry, and you always help me get through it. One year I even edited it out of our services all together. We never received more complaints than that year! Really! Un'tanetokef is a prayer we can't live with, or without!

And let me repeat what I have said countless times; I don't buy the literal interpretation of it – the image of the books, the prayer itself and especially the idea that if we are good we get written in the book of life, and if we are bad...we die! Still as Rabbi Lew points out, the image, the metaphor, even the prayer, has something essential to teach:

“...This is a true story...and it is happening to you, and you are seriously unprepared. And it is real whether you believe in God or not... It makes no difference (what you believe). What makes a difference is that it's real and it is happening right now and it is happening to us, and it is utterly inescapable, and we are completely unprepared. This moment is before us with its choices, and the consequences of our past choices, (as well as) the possibility of our transformation....” (pg 105-106)

I look out at this room, and I know that some seats that are full right now will be empty... some will die, some of us will die, some of us will live, and all of us will change in countless and often unimaginable ways in the year ahead.

Our lives really do, now and forever – at least as long as we live – hang in the balance. The question is, so what? What do we do? What do you do if you are 400 feet off the ground hanging from two rusty bolts? Knowing how precious life is, how do we respond so that whatever life we have is as full and as blessed as it can possibly be?

According to our beloved un'tanetokef there three things we can do to get written in the right book: *teshuvah*, *t'filah* & *tzedaka*.

*Teshuvah* is poorly translated as repentance; but you know “return” is a pretty good translation, yet for me more and more it means telling the truth. Almost anyone who has had a near death experience on a rock face, a car accident or a hospital (or anywhere else!), will tell you that afterwards it is as if a veil is lifted and you see your life in a whole new light. Some of you are familiar with this. And I will tell you what happens to me as a rabbi. People go through near death experiences and they come to me, “Rabbi, I finally get it. I see the truth of my life. I see what’s important. I see the changes I want to make. I see it. I see it. I see it. And I am really afraid I am going to lose it!” And mostly we do lose it. It is awfully hard to stay so clear. But still there is a moment of clarity, and sometimes we actually can make some changes. When Tom and I were hanging off those rusty bolts I saw his heart beating in his chest, our friendship glowed, our lives were brilliantly illuminated. I wanted my mother! and my then girlfriend who is now my wife. Life never felt more precious.

Our sages were smart, they figured out a way to get some clarity about our lives without the near death part! Sitting right here and now we can seek the truth of our lives and let those truths be like homing devices leading us back to who we really are.

The other side of this coin is that without telling the truth there is no hope for redemption. In the traditional liturgy we sing a song when the Israelites make it to the other side of the sea (Mi Chamocha), the song says... “Who is like G-Ad awesome and wondrous?” because God split the sea. In the traditional liturgy, right before we sing “the song” the theme of the prayer is “emet” – the truth. These two things – truth and redemption – are related, because the seas only split when we tell the truth. Moses spoke truth to power (Pharaoh) and the seas split. When you tell the truth, the seas can split for you and others as well.

I was talking to someone recently about this and he said to me, “You know the truth is scary!” This is true but, do you want to live in fear? Or do you want to face each day saying “L’chaim” to life? Do you want to be crippled by your lies, or be lifted up by what you really know is true. In the wisdom of our sages, Rabbi Hillel said that it was one thing that God created us in God’s image, it is another thing that God actually let us know. That it is up to us to fulfill that, and you do that by telling the truth. I am created in God’s image. I can do something! I can really be something special but I have to tell the truth about who I am, who I want to be, what is happening to me, what my dreams and aspirations are. I can’t live a full life without the truth.

Recently through our work with Communities In Conversation, I met an organizer named Joaquin. He’s a heavy set Hispanic man, a little younger than me, with a spouse & three young children. He was a civil engineer for 7 years before he became an Organizer. This is curious for lots of reasons including the fact that the skills of an engineer don’t neatly match that of a Community Organizer, and it was a big deal, given the family he came from to become an engineer. So, I asked what happened, why he made the change, and he told me the following story:

I grew up in San Diego where my dad actually still works, he refinishes pianos. We lived in a kind of rough part of San Diego and the city decided to do some “urban renewal”. They divided the area into three sections. They would buy a section; they would condemn it, and then buy the property from the people whose property they had condemned. Then they would buy another

section and condemn it, and buy the property. My dad's section was the third section! My dad worked most of his life to build his business, and it was a decent business for him, but by the time they got to him he received just pennies on the dollar, and he had to start over.

I said, "Joaquin, you are an organizer so that you can do everything possible in your life to keep other people from suffering the way your dad suffered." "Yeah, that is true." He replied. So I said, "Joaquin, did you ever tell your dad that?" He said, "No, I never told him that." But still you can see how the truth of his life, drove him to change his life, from being an engineer to being an organizer.

One of the names of this day is Yom Hadin, the Day of Judgment. Traditionally it is God who judges, but I think we are the true arbiters. We don't have control of whether we live or die but we do have a hand in what is written, we do decide all the time, how we will live, and sometimes even how we will handle our death. That is one lesson we can walk away with right now, a question we can ask tonight. What am I holding back? What truths do I need to tell to be the person I want to be in the New Year? In other words, what t'shuvah do I need to do now!

T'fila, prayer, how does prayer help us cope, "avert the evil decree" which in my mind is simply the reality that "stuff happens" unpredictably and unexpectedly. First I have to say that our finitude welcomes us in the morning everyday whether we see it in our reflection or not. Anthropologists will tell you that one impulse for prayer is to offer some sense of control in a world where we simply have very little. Others might call prayer a delusion, but I might simply call it comfort. Just think about this evening and the feeling of all of us saying Shema... Or to sing Avinu Malkenu and realize we are singing with the whole Jewish world, and have been singing for 2000 years. It's comforting. I also might point out that our ancestors walked through "the valley of the shadow" many times and made it out the other side, leaving us a "spirit guide", a siddur, this prayer book of ours. It is imperfect: pray selectively; change it sometimes (notice that I do); but use it!

It is also worth noting that showing up, praying, questioning, confronting the prayer book (which I often do) wakes you up! Where else will you confront the existential issues that make up a meaningful life? We may not like this image of the Sefer Chayim & the Sefer Mavet, (the Book of Life and Death) but it sure gets us thinking! As for the idea that through prayer we can "avert the evil decree"... I am not willing to say if prayer is effective or not. It sure doesn't seem that way, right? A lot of people pray, bad things happen, a lot of people don't pray, good things happen. But we still pray for people all the time – mi shaberakh our blessing of healing for example, and I personally pray, every day, at least these days every day. And sometimes I even beg for help...

We pray for people and ourselves, but we also expect that they will go to the doctor (!) and if we need to go, we will go as well. Theology aside, in the end prayer is very personal and I don't think causation – whether it is effective in the sense of it changing what happens to us – is that relevant in as much as prayer "works" regardless of what happens, at least for me.

How about tzedakkah – often translated as charity but it is really a much bigger word stemming from the root – tzedek – justice. How does *tzedakkah* factor into our lives hanging in the balance?

It's simple really – once we realize how precious and precarious all life is we also begin to see the Oneness of it all. It's like a third sight we receive/special 3D glasses – the message of the Shema becomes alive – and we naturally want to act to make life better for everyone.

“The very first thing the Talmud has to say about Rosh Hashanna is, ‘All the inhabitants of the earth stand before God. As it says in the thirty-third psalm: “God fashions their hearts and discerns all their actions’.” (This Totally Real, pg. 71)

We all stand together as one heart.

Recognizing that really the life of the planet hangs in the balance is such a profound heart opener and potential motivator. Giving tzedakkah and of course I am not just talking about money here, I am talking about seeking justice in the world, (you pick the cause) may not keep us from getting cancer or a host of other things, but it sure can offer us a sense of connection, purpose and meaning that is lost when we are lost in our own numbness or indifference to a life that we take for granted but which is actually quite temporary, precious and unpredictable.

Martin Luther King is one of my heroes, I have very few. He gave a sermon that is known as “the Drum Major’s Speech” a few months before he died. He gave a lot of talks right before he died. He obviously had a prescient sense that his death was imminent. If you read his sermons you feel that he knew what was coming. And in this speech he said (I am paraphrasing now) “I don’t want to be remembered as the drum major. Do you know who is the drum major? The drum major is the guy up front with the staff. I don’t want to be remembered as the drum major. I have received the Nobel peace prize, I have met with prime ministers and presidents, I have marched with famous people, I have gotten hundreds of awards, and this is how I want to be remembered: Not as the drum major but as someone who helped someone, someone who fed someone, someone who cared for someone, someone who was on the right about the war question. I don’t want to be remembered as the drum major, I want to be remembered as someone who helped to make the world a better place. That is how I want to be remembered.”

This is real, these fragile precious lives of ours and we can be prepared, we can wake up to how really glorious if not also tragic living can be.

Teshuvah, coming home, being true to ourselves really helps.

Tefilah, prayer, showing up here and during the rest of the year makes a difference, as does our own ongoing generosity and search for justice in every way (Tzedakah).

I miss rock climbing; the vertical world is stunning to behold. I miss my old buddies and our camaraderie. Most of all I miss how alive I felt at those moments on the edge, when my life literally hung in the balance. I don’t miss the danger zones that these moments of clarity required. The story I told is one of many really (I am embarrassed to say) and it is certainly more benign than the time I actually fell 50 feet to the ground, almost died and had to be rescued! Near

death experiences have their value but when we have a choice, we'd do better to learn their lessons a safer way.

And that is exactly what the Holy Days offer; a wakeup call – think of the blast of the shofar – to the unsettling fact that yes, our lives are always hanging in the balance, and that while we have little control over “who shall live and who shall die”, we do have a hand in how we respond to what life brings us and even the way we handle death. It's awesome to think about, really. And scary, and maybe that is why these days are called in Hebrew the Yamim Noraim, The Days of Awe.... Shannah Tovah.