

Yom Kippur Day 5777 (October 12, 2016)

Joy and Vulnerability: Sukkot and Wise Aging Together

Let's begin with birth....

Four years ago, on the fifth day of Sukkot, our oldest daughter, Noa was born. We didn't know she was going to be a daughter, preferring to be surprised. What was totally unexpected was how surprised I was when the nurse said "It's a girl." I was completely and irrationally shocked. And, in the same moment, I was aware of the strangeness of being completely shocked and amazed by something that I took as a 50% probability - as if shocked that a coin-toss came up heads.

I realized later that my shock had nothing to do with girl or boy, but was because this was the first time she was the subject of a sentence when she was alive in the world. Despite all the attention we had given to that moment, despite the thousands of sentences we'd spoken over the preceding months and years in which she was the subject, it was still shocking because the fact of her actually being there with us felt like a miracle. It didn't matter how much I understood the possibility. When it came, it was a shock.

Death is the same way: shocking even when it's absolutely expected.

This sermon is about reconciling the constant tension between life and death: How fear and avoidance of death can diminish our capacity to live fully.

I'm going to talk about how this tension is manifest in us and our behavior, and the ways the Jewish festivals guide us in living fully with this tension.

Death can transform the emotional landscape in ways that are totally unpredictable.

Unpredictable, but generally very scary and sad at first, and we don't like scary sadness, so we avoid it and hide.

Hiding from something that is going to kill you is good common sense. Fear of death is primal because it can help keep us alive. Fear is an excellent way to protect ourselves from danger.

But what about death when there is no danger?

What if fear is not protecting us but only disrupting our lives? Like wearing a life preserver in a wading pool.

In that case, primal fear may *diminish* our participation in life but not actually make us live longer or better, only sadder.

I spoke on Rosh Hashanah about all the images of refuge and escape in Psalm 27, The Psalm for the Season of Repentance; these refuges include God's house, God's palace and protecting fort. They also include God's Sukkah. One interpretation of this psalm is that it is referencing festivals in the month of Tishrei: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot.

The festivals of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are full of birth and death. On Rosh Hashanah we say over and over *Hayom harat olam!* "Today the world is conceived!" In other words: The world is full of limitless potential! And also this season we chant *untaneh tokef*, in the Musaf service, that great reflection on death with the image of books open in heaven where the names of all humanity are inscribed for life or death. This image is followed by an exhaustive list of how people might die. On Yom Kippur, ideally, we remove ourselves from the needs of the body and put on the kittle which is the traditional burial garment and stand right on the edge and look into the abyss.

And then, four days later comes Sukkot, which gets short shrift in many communities. We finish Yom Kippur, we "come through the gates" in a few hours with, hopefully, focus on the year ahead and then we have a lovely break-fast and that's it. But this whole practice of self-reflection and *teshuvah* that started forty days ago, is about *how we want to live in the world*. We recognize our vulnerability and the closeness of death - we dress for it! and then... we remain alive! That is a cause for celebration!

Can we live joyfully even while we're aware of our vulnerability? Yes, we can! In the Jewish calendar we have four days to prepare the *party* after the life threatening experience of Yom Kippur. That party is called *Sukkot* - a celebration of joy in vulnerability.

Sukkot, uniquely in the Torah is described as *Ach Simcha!* (Deut 16:15) Only Joy! It is called *Zman Simchataynu* "The time of our joy." The moment in the agricultural cycle is important here. Sukkot is the last harvest of the year thus allowing for full celebration in an agricultural society because there is no crop in the field demanding attention.

More significant, is that this is the time when the rains begin in winter. Half the year there is no rain. In our tradition rain is closely associated with blessing. The rain is the only way to prepare the soil, to replenish the groundwater and fill the wells and cisterns. Imagine the world where life depends on the rain and every year you come to the celebration of the final harvest and wait to see if blessing will come. Life depends on it! And every morning, during the days of *Sukkot*, the Talmud describes the ritual of filling of a large vessel with water that is poured out on the altar. (*Bet*

haShoevah - the water libation) This is done with the joyous hope and expectation that the water will be replenished through the rains. Then at night there was a festive parade of lights with copious oil lamps to celebrate. The Mishnah (Sukkot 5;2) says:

One who has not seen the rejoicing at the place of the water-drawing has never seen rejoicing!" And after describing all of the lamps and huge volume of oil it says: "there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that was not illumined by the light of the celebration of the water-libation."

This is a kind of intense joy that happens in fearless vulnerability.

The *sukkah*, the hut itself, is open to the world. It has no pretension of being safe or stable. We come through the gates so we can live more fully and fearlessly and be joyous in the *sukkah*. Joy in a flimsy hut where we can feel the wind and see the stars and get splattered by the rain because we do not need a fortress or a bunker.

For those of you who know the film *The Seventh Seal* by Ingmar Bergman, there is a famous motif where the main character, Antonius Block encounters the angel of death. They end up playing a game of chess that Block knows he cannot win. After their first encounter and first series of moves Block is alone and looks at his hand and says:

"This is my hand. I can turn it. The blood gushes in it. The sun is still in the sky and the wind is blowing. And I... I, Antonius Block, am playing chess with Death."

It's so mundane! "This is my hand, I can turn it! The wind is blowing, the sun is high in the sky." But it is not mundane at all, he is in an intense appreciation of every aspect of life because of his closeness to death. (To see this moment from the film, [click here.](#))

Two years ago I spoke about visiting my friend, Rabbi Bonna D'vorah Haberman (z"l) when she was ill in Israel. Bonna was a very intense person and incredibly attentive to details, trying to enjoy all of them, for example, the beauty of the individual crowns of the pomegranates on the trees in her garden. She didn't swig or gobble anything. When she ate, it was the blessing over what she was eating or drinking, and then a careful tasting, as if for the first time. And when she was sick, every time I spoke to her, she expressed such gratitude for life and the miracles surrounding her. She would say "every breath is so precious, every moment is such a gift." Her illness intensified her already dramatic appreciation of life. She was also a Joni Mitchell fan, so I'll finish this reflection with "Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got 'till it's gone!"

There was fear. She was afraid, but also exhilaration and deep appreciation possible when one is that close to *life*. Not close to death, it was that too, but her illness intensified her experience of living.

Despite Bonna's very strong and distinct personality, this is a model for all of us. I want for myself and for this community to experience and participate fully in the raw thrill of life, the joy of being alive, the simple connections, the simple beauties, the fact that we can do this [*turn hand*]. That thrill is not because we are safe, but because we can have moments when we are fearless and do not need to hide.

We can know and love and appreciate what we've got *before* it's gone.

I want this community as much as possible to be ready with wills updated and funeral plots purchased, and even obituaries written! Too much?

As many of you know, this topic is very present for me because both my parents are facing serious health challenges. A few months ago we went, the three of us, to the funeral home to arrange and pay for their funerals. Then we went and had a lovely lunch. They drafted their obituaries and my mom asked me to do a little editing on hers.

It made me happy. It is a huge relief, maybe for me especially because I'm the guy who calls the relatives the day of a death to start planning the funeral and ask about the obituary so we can put a notice out to the community. Some of you have had this conversation with me. The obituary becomes this extra challenge with a deadline, on what is a particularly difficult day. Who needs that? You don't want a writing assignment with a deadline on that day and you don't want your relatives to have to do it, either.

Is it possible that we could change the culture here, in our little corner of the world, so there's better emotional and practical preparation? For me, that means the possibility of more joy, more gratitude and fewer crises. So here's what we did at the synagogue. Last year we started reflecting on some of these issues with the Wise Aging Together program. There was a wonderful group of twenty six participants and six facilitators, we read together the book Wise Aging: Living with Joy Resilience and Spirit. I hope it was a first step at making this change in our synagogue culture.

This year we will continue with another group. I hope many of you will participate. The first of the eight sessions is on November 6th. There are fliers describing it on the table downstairs. This multi-session group requires consistency to be effective, so participants need to commit to attending six of the eight sessions.

In addition to that group, we will have workshops and activities open to the whole community. We already had a session of Soul Collage lead by Nancy Bain, which was a creative vehicle for personal reflection connected with this Season of Repentance. In the coming months we are also planning sessions on writing ethical wills - which are letters to the next generation to pass on your wisdom, life experience, blessings and advice. We also hope to have a session on the Five Wishes - a way of thinking coherently and deeply about those things you want to have in place at the end of life and a panel related to planning and financial matters. Now, of course, when we say "End of life" we want pull a blanket over the heads, but instead, think of it as a safety belt.

Every time I get into a car, I prepare for an accident. Without thinking about it, I acknowledge my vulnerability. I don't think about the accident, I just do a little something to make sure it's not as bad as it might be.

How might we do that in our community: To create a culture where people are living with a bit more gratitude and joy?

G'mar Hatimah Tovah! - May your name be sealed in the Book of Life

And may the passage through the Gates of Repentance, this afternoon, lead you to deeper and fearless celebration of your life.