

We Plan and God Laughs

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Thirty years ago while I was a rabbinic student in Israel, I boarded a bus one morning headed to Jerusalem after spending the weekend in Tel Aviv. Needing to return in time for classes that morning, I found an early morning bus, bought my ticket, and promptly fell asleep on the bus. And everything worked out fine, except that when the bus stopped and I finally woke up, I quickly realized that we were not in Jerusalem at all. Sheep and camels surrounded the bus as I discovered that we were in Be'er Sheva, a dusty city in the south of Israel. It seemed that in my early morning stupor, I had gotten on the wrong bus. I ended up missing my classes that day but had some terrific falafel and spent a memorable morning in the desert.

Looking back over the past year of my life, I have returned many times to the memory of that day when I thought I was traveling to Jerusalem but ended up in Be'er Sheva instead. A year ago as I stood before you at the High Holy Days, I didn't know that within a few months my life would be diverted in a different direction, one I hadn't anticipated at all. I had plans and my schedule was filled with B'nai Mitzvah and board meetings and the day-to-day life of synagogue and home. The truth is that initially I approached cancer as a scheduling issue and imagined I'd to be back at synagogue leading services much sooner than was actually possible. But we all know the old Yiddish expression, *der mensch tracht, un Gott lacht*/we plan and God laughs. Over time I realized that the more I planned, the more God laughed. For me, it was cancer. What was it for you? Because the truth is that everyone's got something. Life isn't a straight line, not for any of us. From one year to the next our lives curve and detour and bring us to places we could never imagine - some of them places of pain, trauma, and loss. Others, places of unimagined beauty, healing, and hope. And most times, it's a little bit of both.

Just moments after learning about my diagnosis, I received a call from a hospital social worker. She kindly asked how she could support me. "Actually, I'm on my way home now to tell my sons about my diagnosis. Do you have any thoughts about what I should say to them?" I asked. "Oh yes," she replied, "Just lay out the facts calmly and the most important thing you can do is to reassure them that you're not going to die from this." After arriving home, Frank and I sat down with Adam and Eli, and heeding the social worker's advice I said, "I just want you to know that I am very lucky. They caught my cancer early and I'm going to be okay, I'm not going to die from this. Everything will be fine and I'm not going to die from this." To which they lovingly responded, "Why do you keep saying that? You're freaking us out." "That's what the lady told me to say," I explained. And they were right to be "freaked out" when I told them, over and over again, that I wasn't going to die. You see it's not really what they needed to hear that day. They wanted to know if I was going to be in pain, if I would suffer. They wanted to know that our family would be okay, that our home and our lives would continue to be warm and safe and loving.

After she was diagnosed with metastatic cancer that ultimately took her life, author Nina Riggs said, "Dying isn't the end of the world. There are so many things that are worse than death: old grudges, a lack of self-awareness, severe constipation, no sense of humor, the grimace on your husband's face as he empties your surgical drain into the measuring cup."ⁱ My dear friends, today the Book of Life

stands open before us as we ask who shall live and who shall die. But in reality, it's not just about who lives and who dies, but rather **how we live and how we die**. What truly matters is everything that happens in between the bookends of birth and death. All of the messiness of life, like surgical drains. And old grudges. Like pain. Tears. Relationships. Like love. Like hope. And the sheer unpredictability of it all. We all make plans. We all possess dreams for ourselves and for the people we love. And life is beautiful and holy, and it is uncertain and tenuous as well. And the best we can do is to fully embrace the sacred messiness of it all. Today, on this day the rabbis call a rehearsal for death, we withdraw from all that is life-giving and life-affirming, like food and water and work, and instead focus on the enduring nature of our souls and our deeds. That's what Yom Kippur is about, that's why we come here each year to face the fragility of our own existence and to grow in awareness and acceptance. Because the deepest truth of this day is that we are mortal and that our lives are finite.

This is what a rabbi had in mind when he announced during Yom Kippur services that everyone in the congregation would one day die. The sanctuary grew silent contemplating this weighty notion when a man in the front started laughing. And laughing. And the rabbi asked indignantly, "What is so funny? Didn't you hear what I said, that everyone in this congregation will die?" Smiling, the man replied, "But I'm not a member of this congregation." We know better, though. We know that as much as we may try, we can't escape our death or those of the people we love. That is the nature of our human existence. Yet it is the very awareness of our mortality that brings urgency and meaning and depth to our lives.

This isn't a sermon about cancer, nor is it about death. This is a sermon about life, about how we live with life's uncertainties despite our illusion of control. It's about waking up to the fullness and beauty of our lives. It's about waking up in Be'er Sheva when we meant to travel to Jerusalem and finding meaning and joy along the way.

"Certainty is seductive," said Rabbi Irwin Kula. "Our culture rewards knowing and makes not-knowing a liability." And it's true. Today, information is just a click away, and we have grown accustomed to finding answers before the questions even arise. Between digital calendars, endless alerts, and mobile organizers, we have nearly perfected our ability to plan and still, life is unpredictable. Advanced medical testing and imaging open a window into the inner workings of our own bodies and yet we still cannot eradicate disease. With early detection systems and advanced satellite technology we can predict hurricanes and tornadoes before they happen, and yet, we are powerless to stop them. (Although modern forecasting systems have drastically reduced death tolls from hurricanes and other natural disasters.ⁱⁱ) Yes, healthier eating and advanced screening have both prolonged our lives, but we still get sick and contract disease. And yes, our GPS navigation systems prevent us from getting lost much of the time, but still with all of this, we haven't been able to conquer all of life's unknowns. And perhaps we weren't meant to at all.

Imagine if we had a crystal ball and we could see into the future. I'm not talking about those black plastic Magic 8 balls that when turned upside down give us Yes or No answers. I'm talking about a powerful crystal ball that could foresee our future from one year to the next. What if we could see what will happen five years from now? The horrible things that happen to us today would be softened if we knew they would have a positive outcome. But, on the other hand, imagine our terror from

knowing the worst possible outcomes ahead of time, outcomes we can see but can do nothing to alter. The humility of these Holy Days emerges from not knowing the future, as excruciating as it can feel at times. And it comes from living in a state of hope and faith as well. So tonight, we stand together before the sacred mystery and majesty of it all, with hands and hearts open to the future, open to this new year, whatever it may bring.

Over 200 years ago, when Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev was facing his own serious illness, he cried out, “Eternal Presence of the Universe, I am not asking You to show me the secret of Your ways, for it would be too much for me. But I am asking You to show me one thing: what is the meaning of my suffering, what does my suffering require of me?” One man in our community discovered his own answers to Levi Yitzchak’s burning questions. Over a five-year period, while still in his 40s, Aaron had a brain tumor, surgery, lymphoma, chemotherapy, and had to bury his younger sister when she died just last year. When I asked him how he got through it all, he said, “My humble life experience is this: we are all in control of our interpretation. I wasn’t in control of my brain tumor or the lymphoma and I couldn’t save my sister’s life. But I am in control of my outlook. It doesn’t mean we don’t mourn or get angry. At the end of the day,” he added, “I am only in control of how I choose to respond. And it always could be much worse.” “Really. How?” I asked. And he told me. “I would walk through the children’s hospital when I went for treatment and I’d see these kids who had life-threatening diseases with big smiles on their faces. And I knew I had it good, that I was blessed.” When I listened to Aaron, I heard echoes of Viktor Frankl who spent years in Nazi concentration camps, lost his home, his family, his freedom, and nearly his own life. Through his ordeal he came to believe that even when we can’t control our environment or the circumstances of our lives, what we can control is our response. Our outlook. And our own actions.

This is what Judi Sheppard learned 22 years ago when she gave birth to beautiful twins, Aviva and Jacob. To Judi and her husband John, it soon became apparent that Jacob was not developing like his sister. You see, Jacob is a non-verbal young man with severe autism and cognitive impairment. He lacks the ability to control his mind, his actions, his words, and his life. “It is challenging and painful,” Judi said. But despite all of the frustration and pain, she has learned so much from Jacob. Judi explains, “Jacob has taught me the most important things in life. He’s taught me to live with no conditions and no expectations of him. No judgment. He’s taught me patience and acceptance.” And, Judi added, “When Jacob smiles, it changes my world; it’s as if he graduated from Harvard Law School.” For Judi, Jacob is her blessing, her teacher. Rabbi Bradley Artson also has a son named Jacob who also has autism. About his Jacob, he says, “Jacob reminds me that all we have is today, now. Tomorrow may never be, and it will certainly not be what we expect it to be. So don’t postpone joy, or reconciliation, or love. Life is to be lived now, on this day, because this day is what we have and it is all we have.”ⁱⁱⁱ *U’vacharta bachayim*. Choose life, our Yom Kippur Torah portion Nitzavim teaches us. Choose life. Choose life today. Choose life this year. Choose life right now. Because in the end, this is all we have.

Shortly after my diagnosis, I received a thoughtful card that said, “I suspect that when something like this happens, it’s an awakening.” In fact, I’d heard from many people, many of you, about your insights and growth after cancer and other illnesses. And to tell you the truth, I kept waiting for mine. And it just didn’t come. Not for a long time, or at least, not that I recognized. Because I had plans, I

had things to do. I intended to jump right back into B'nai Mitzvah and leading services until I heard this voice laughing in my ear. And I didn't know whether it was my own voice or that of God saying to me: Stop planning. Find a nice, soft blanket. Rest. Allow your body to heal. Have some chicken soup. Watch Netflix. So that's what I did. Frank would bring me jasmine tea with just the right amount of honey, and each day after school, the boys would sit on my bed, grab a corner of the warm blanket, and tell me about their day. And to me, that was everything. It was my whole world. It was my awakening.

Ecclesiastes Rabbah teaches that a baby enters the world with hands clenched, as if to say, 'The world is mine; I will grab it.' But when we leave this world it is with open hands, as if to say, 'I can take nothing with me.' This is what I learned, to open my hands and to let go, even if just for a while. To stop looking to the future, to live in a single moment, to listen to my body, to honor my soul, to sit quietly, and to walk slowly. And only then, only when I did these things day after day, did God stop laughing and start smiling. This was my awakening.

Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi was walking with his young daughter when she asked, "Abba, when we're asleep we can wake up. So when we're awake, can we wake up even more?" This year, I woke up even more, more than I ever have before, and I feel alive and strong, hopeful and grateful, to you, to God, and for another chance to live this adventure we call life. This is my prayer for each of us and our world - that this year, we awaken to love, to peace, and to the power of each moment.

Materials and inspiration for this sermon were drawn from:

Saying No and Letting Go, Rabbi Edwin Goldberg

Yearnings: Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life, Irwin Kula

Overcoming Life's Disappointments, Harold Kushner

When Breath Becomes Air, Paul Kalanithi

The Bright Hour: A Memoir of Living and Dying, Nina Riggs

Standing on the Edge, Joan Halifax

ⁱ *The Bright Hour*, Nina Riggs

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.popsoci.com/noaa-satellites-storm-predictions>. The Galveston hurricane of 1900 killed 8,000 people. Not realizing the extent of the storm those in its path didn't have enough time to evacuate to safety

ⁱⁱⁱ *Everyone is Someone's Jacob: What I Learned from my Autistic Son*, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson