

A Soul Accounting
Kol Nidre 5772 – Rabbi Toba Spitzer

Before we begin the signature prayers of Yom Kippur, the Selichot, prayers for forgiveness, I wanted to share a few thoughts with you.

It may have been that I had a somewhat over-active imagination as a young person. Or an odd way of making myself feel better. Whatever it was, when I was a kid I would sometimes imagine my death-bed scene. In this scene, all those whom I felt were not adequately appreciating me in the moment would be gathered, and they would be singing my praises, realizing what they were about to lose. I would take great satisfaction in their contriteness, and their imagined promises to treat me differently if I were to recover.

I don't have any memory of what I imagined these people would say about me, and that's probably just as well! But I'd guess that I'm not the only one to have entertained such a scene in my head, however embarrassing it is to admit. Who doesn't want to imagine that we'll be sorely missed when we're gone, that all those who failed to appreciate us in life will come to the realization of all of our gifts once we're no longer here?

On Yom Kippur, we're asked to confront our own mortality for a somewhat different purpose, one that doesn't involve showing other people how wrong they were about us. And that purpose is tied to the prayers that we're about to say, this space we're about to enter into.

On Yom Kippur, we are invited to contemplate our own mortality. It's traditional to wear a kittel, this white garment that I have on, which is reminiscent of the shrouds in which Jews are buried. We refrain from eating and from physical pleasure over these 25 hours, as a way of affirming our spiritual aspects, and leaving behind the needs of the body. We recite the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, where we wonder who will live and who will die in the year to come, reminding ourselves that all of us, no matter how young or how old, no matter how healthy, or unhealthy, we may feel – all of us are made of dust, are eventually bound to return to dust.

All of these rituals, this whole elaborate set-up, is a powerful way to get us to think not so much about our death, but about the quality of our life, of our remaining days. It's as if the Universe is posing this question to us: what do you want to be said about you when you're gone? What is the legacy you will leave behind? What is the legacy that you are creating right now?

As I was thinking about this talk, I began to peruse the eulogies that I've given at funerals in my 15 years as a rabbi. It's a very great privilege to lay someone to rest, to say the words that will attempt to sum up a life, to convey a sense of who a person was, and what he or she meant to those left behind.

Many of the people I've helped bury, often parents of Dorshei Tzedek members, are not people I've ever met, or if I have met, I only knew superficially. So what I say about them is a reflection of what their family and friends tell me. I become the witness to those aspects of a person that those who knew them best can attest to.

None of the people I've eulogized were particularly famous; none were being remembered for having won a Nobel Prize or being the first person to walk on the moon. They were just people with families, with jobs, with some accomplishments and some frustrations; all the ups and downs of a life. Like all of us here.

Here are some words from those eulogies:

"He was a man of great humility, someone who acted with great kindness and love to those around him, someone who sought no reward for himself, but sought only to care as well as someone possibly could for his family and those he loved."

"She had an expansiveness of heart, the willingness to shelter and care for others, the dedication to creating a truly nurturing, joyful, and Jewish home."

"Her heart was open to those who stumbled, to those who struggled."

"He was a man with the 'patience of a saint.' He 'put everyone before himself,' and would support anything that you wanted to do."

"She filled the moments of her life so beautifully with the qualities of love and compassion. She didn't dwell on the negatives in her life, her own struggles, but embraced the joy, the music, the love."

"I was moved and impressed to hear about his encouragement and support of who each of you truly are, not trying to mold you in his image but giving of himself so that you could come fully into yourselves."

"She sounded to me like a woman who 'took the world into her arms,' who faced the difficulties and challenges of her life with great resolve and strength, who loved the people around her deeply and openly, who embraced politics and causes and opinions."

None of these people were perfect; all had their faults, their complexities, their challenges. But the positive words that I speak at a funeral attest to a person's enduring qualities, to those gifts that they leave behind.

It's also interesting, as I think about sitting with families before a funeral and talking about their loved one, what I usually don't hear:

No one ever tells me how much money the person was worth when s/he died.

No one tells me what his/her kitchen countertops were made of, or how often s/he remodeled his/her home.

No one tells me the person's grade point average, or how many colleges s/he got into.

I am extremely rarely told about the model of car they drove, what kinds of restaurants they could afford, or how many people they were smarter than.

But I do sometimes hear about regrets, about things that might have been: an encouraging word not spoken, a judgmental attitude that could not be overcome; a wish that members of a family had been closer, had been more open with one another, had said all that needed to be said.

So here we are, wearing white, looking into ourselves, writing our own eulogies. What do we want it to say? What gifts would we leave behind, if we were to disappear tomorrow? We don't have to be particularly accomplished, have done lots of stuff, be the best at anything. Acts of kindness; words of friendship; integrity and passion and commitment; the ways in which we love and are loved – this is what will be remembered about us.

And once we've thought about this, about who we truly want to be, then comes the *cheshbon hanefesh*, the "soul accounting."

I once worked for a man, Jeffrey Dekro, the founder of the Shefa Fund, who told me that you could tell the values of an organization by looking at its budget. Where it spends its money, that's what its priorities are. When we do *cheshbon hanefesh*, a soul accounting, we're doing the same thing. If I want to be remembered as a good friend, as a caring person, as someone who values certain things and takes action in line with those values, then I need to look at how I spend my time, how I spend my money, where I put my effort – does it line up? Does my expenditure of energy and resources match up with what I tell myself is most important to me?

This is not an easy process. Most of us think of ourselves as relatively good people, and I'm sure if I asked any of you what was most important to you, you'd say truly important things—family, friends, saving the planet, caring for others. Our intentions are good. But what are we actually doing in our lives? If we kept track of our time, our money, our energy, what would our accounting tell us? Do the numbers add up?

Of course, there is a certain amount of time and energy that needs to be spent on the business of living – money earned, groceries bought, cars repaired. But perhaps we have a little more leeway than we might imagine. Where are the places in our lives where we tell ourselves we don't have a choice but to do things this way, when in reality we do have a choice, and could do it differently if we truly wanted?

Yom Kippur is an invitation to begin a process, to do the accounting and see how things line up. If there are imbalances, if I realize that I'm spending an awful lot of my mental or

physical energy on things that I ultimately don't think are that important, then perhaps in the new year I can begin to make some adjustments.

For all this talk of mortality, Yom Kippur is considered a joyful fast day, not a day to bewail our fate. It's joyful, I think, because we're being given this huge gift: an opportunity to start afresh in the new year. To atune our lives with what we know to be most precious and most true. An opportunity to experience each and every day, each and every moment, as an opportunity for renewal, for *teshuvah*, for turning onto a path of wholeness. Our tradition has such incredible faith in each and every one of us that it considers us forgiven, already! As long as our intention is sincere, our hearts open. We are the ones writing the book of our lives. We can't control the beginning or the ending, but we have a lot to say about what happens in between.