

Live Life How You Want To Be Remembered

Sermon for Yom Kippur, Kol Nidrei Services, 5776/ 2015

by Rabbi Lisa S. Malik

A young woman and her 3 children, who were traveling to Cherry Hill, NJ to visit the woman's college roommate, arrived in Philadelphia at 2 in the morning, after a very long train ride from Boston. The train had been delayed, and so, the person who was supposed to pick her up from the station, wasn't able to make it. For whatever reason, there were no taxis available that night at 30th Street Station & this was before the days of Uber. The woman's 18-month old son was having a meltdown and was crying (actually, screaming at the top of his lungs). Her 3-year old daughter was whining, kvetching that she was really hungry. The woman had run out of all of the snack food she had packed for the trip, and, no surprise given the late hour, all of the food stands in the train station were already closed. In a fit of desperation, the woman cried out, "Will somebody please help me?"

At that moment, an older gentleman appeared from out of nowhere. After hearing her tale of woe, he said to the young woman, "Follow me." And she did. Without asking any questions, she followed him to the parking lot with her 3 kids. At the car, he took her bags and stroller and put them in the trunk.

What do you think happened next?

The kind man drove the young woman and her 3 children all the way to Cherry Hill, which is about a half-hour drive from Center City Philadelphia. During the drive, the woman found out that the man's daughter lived in Boston, not far from where she lived.

When the woman returned to Boston, she couldn't stop talking about the caring stranger who had been so kind to her in the Philadelphia train station. Particularly anxious to meet the man's daughter, she called her up and told her the story. The young woman concluded the story by saying, "You have no idea **what a special man your father is.**"

That special man's daughter happens to be a friend of mine. She said that she was so proud to find out that her father had helped a complete stranger, had truly gone out of his way for her. If the young woman had not gotten in touch with her, she might never have even heard the story..... because her father was not only kind, he was also modest; he never even told her about the kindness he had done for that young woman and her three children.

Of course, when my friend found out about her father's act of loving kindness, she couldn't stop talking about. (That's how I found out about it!) But what's really remarkable is **the impact that that story had on my friend's children, the grandchildren of that kind gentleman**. This story happened nearly 10 years ago and they are still talking about it. Recently, when I went to visit my friend in Boston, I heard one of my friend's kids say to her during bedtime, "Mommy, tell the Grandpa train station story again!"

We never know which moments will define us. When that man helped that woman and her 3 children at 30th Street Station that night, did he have any idea that his actions would make him a living legend in the eyes of his daughter and his grandchildren? **Do any of us know which events in our lives will become defining parts of our life's story?**

Although some of what happens to us in life is out of our hands, we do have some control in the way our life unfolds and in the way our life's story will be told.

During the High Holidays season, Jewish people around the world are encouraged to engage in what's known in Hebrew as "**cheshbon hanefesh.**" The phrase literally means, "**an accounting of the soul**" & it refers to the process of self-introspection and self-judgment that is supposed to guide us in identifying concrete steps towards self-improvement. At the beginning of every year, we are encouraged to look back on the previous year and ask ourselves, "**Was I the best person I could be?**" and "**From this moment on, what can I do to become an even better person?**"

In the High Holidays liturgy, the holiday of Rosh HaShanah is often referred to as "**Yom Ha-Din**", the **Day of Judgment.**" During the High Holidays season, while we judge ourselves as part of the *cheshbon nefesh* process, **God also judges us**, considering the deeds of each person and deciding who will be inscribed in *Sefer Ha-Chayim* (the Book of Life) for a good year.

In the Jewish tradition, it is not just Rosh HaShanah that is known as "*Yom Ha-Din*", the "Day of Judgment." God will also judge each and every one of us on the day of our death. / It also part of the Jewish belief system that God will judge the Jewish people as a whole during the days of the Mashiach, at the End of Days.

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According to some of the Rabbis in the Talmud, there are some very specific **questions that God will ask each of us on these Days of Judgment.**

For example, in Masechet Shabbat (**BT Shabbat 31a**), Rava teaches that, when a person is led to God in judgment, God will ask,

- 1) (*"Nasata v'natata b'emunah?"*) In your dealings with others, were you honest and did you act with integrity?
- 2) (*"Kavata itim la-Torah?"*) Did you set aside time to study Torah and engage in other Jewish learning?
- 3) (*"Asakta b'friyah u-riviyah?"*) Translated literally, these words mean, "Did you engage in procreation?" But, in his book, "The Seven Questions You're Asked In Heaven," Dr. Ron Wolfson understands this phrase to mean, "Did you leave a legacy?"
- 4) (*"Tzipita li-yeshuah?"*) Did you have hope in your heart?
- 5) (*"Pilpalta b'chochmah? Hevanta davar mitoch davar?"*) Translated literally, these words mean, "Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom & did you understand one thing from another?" Dr. Wolfson understands these words to mean, "Did you get your priorities straight?"

I am going to repeat these 5 questions that God will ask us at the end of our lives, and this time, I ask you to reflect and think about how you might answer these questions today:

- 1) Were you **honest**?
- 2) Did you leave a **legacy**?
- 3) Did you set aside time to **study Torah**?
- 4) Did you have **hope** in your heart?
- 5) Did you get your **priorities** straight?

Whether or not you believe that God will literally ask you these questions and judge you accordingly, these are valuable questions to ask yourself. / And whether or not you believe that God will literally inscribe your name in a Book of Life, we each have an **opportunity to inscribe actions into the metaphorical books of our lives, acts of goodness that we & our children & grandchildren will remember with pride.**

Along these lines, the Jewish philosopher, **Bahya Ibn Pakuda**, wrote in his book, "**Duties of the Heart**,"  
**"Days are scrolls.  
Write on them what you want to be remembered."**

Just a few weeks ago, when I was visiting someone in the hospital, I saw a similar sentiment inscribed on a wall sign that was for sale in the gift shop, "**Live life in the way that you want to be remembered.**"

This sentiment **not only applies to each of us as individuals**. It **also applies to us as a group of American Jews living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**. Each of us has the opportunity to make the world a better place by ensuring the continued existence of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. Unfortunately, we live in a world in which terrorist groups like **Hamas** explicitly call for the obliteration of Israel. We are also living on the brink of disaster, as **Iran**, the world's leading sponsor of terrorism, a country that publically calls for "Death to America" and "Death to Israel," gets closer to becoming a nuclear threshold state.

As you know, this past July, world leaders got together in Vienna and struck an agreement, which will enable Iran, in as few as 10-15 years, to possess nuclear weapons capabilities. While I know that not everyone agrees with me, I have been very vocal over the past few months about my opinion that the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA) is a **bad deal**. Though I will not enumerate the reasons now, suffice it to say that there are many negative aspects of this deal that have potentially disastrous consequences: for us as Americans and as Jews who support the State of Israel.

Yet, despite the fact that a majority of members of the Senate & the House of Representatives (269:172), as well as a majority of the people in America who were polled about this deal (by a factor of 2:1) were opposed to the JCPOA, the deal is still going into effect.

Now, I know that there are many Americans, including some American Jews and even some of my rabbinic colleagues, who believe that this **deal is 'good-enough.'** Interestingly enough, many of the Senators who supported the JCPOA, including New Jersey's own **Cory Booker**, **admitted that it's not a good deal**, but supported it anyway!

**But despite the disagreements about the deal, everyone agrees** that we should **remain gravely concerned about Iranian support for terrorism**. According to the terms of the JCPOA, Iran will gain access to \$130-\$150 billion dollars in frozen assets as early as this December. Since Iran is known to be one of the world's largest sponsors of terror against Israel and the United States, there is concern that some of this windfall from JCPOA sanctions relief will be used to continue financing terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, Hamas, & ISIS.

**Another point of agreement** between those who oppose and those who support the Iran deal is a **shared concern about global anti-Semitism**. In this day and age, anti-Semitism appears in various forms, ranging from swastikas painted on buildings and other hate crimes to the BDS movement (the initiative to increase boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against Israel). As I have pointed out again and again, the **virulent anti-Israel rhetoric** on college campuses, in the media, and even in the entertainment industry today, is just **anti-Semitism in a different guise**.

You may have heard about what happened over the summer in **Spain**, when the American Jewish singer, **Matisyahu**, was scheduled to appear in concert as part of the Rototom Sunsplash European Reggae Festival. The festival organizers canceled Matisyahu's performance under pressure from the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, & Sanctions) movement, citing a "campaign of pressure, coercion and threats" against it, stoking fears that the festival would be disrupted after Matisyahu ignored requests that he issue a statement declaring his support for Palestinian statehood.

Matisyahu is not Israeli, but was apparently singled out by BDS activists because he was the only Jewish performer on the festival's roster. Many Jewish organizations condemned the cancellation of Matisyahu's performance, as did the government of Spain and Matisyahu himself, who wrote on his Facebook page that the festival organizers' behavior had been "appalling and offensive."

A few days later, the festival organizers apologized for canceling Matisyahu's performance, and allowed him to perform a 45-minute set on the last day of the festival. Some in the audience expressed disapproval when the artist took the stage, chanting, "Out, Out!." And when Matisyahu sang his song, "Jerusalem," many waved Palestinian flags in protest.

Commenting on the initial cancellation of Matisyahu's scheduled performance at the Sunsplash Festival, **Douglas Murray** wrote an article entitled, "**The New Racists: Jew Hate,**" that was featured on the website of the **Gatestone Institute International Policy Council**. In Murray's words:

- If you had thought that the only qualification needed is to excel at your chosen art form and then see if you can gather audiences, you were wrong. That is not enough anymore -- certainly not if you are Jewish.
  - The treatment of the reggae star Matisyahu is something new. For Matisyahu is not an Israeli -- he is an American. For a while, only Israeli Jews were made pariahs among the nations..... Now it is Jews born anywhere else in the world who can be targeted in the same way. **They are singling out Jews -- Jews and only Jews.**
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Now, going back to the **questions that each of us should ask ourselves**, and that **God will ask us on *Yom Ha-Din***, I would like to **add another question to Rava's list**, & it's a question that I address to the **American Jewish community as a whole**.

**Looking back at this moment in history**, how will we respond to this question: **"Did we do everything that we could to ensure the continued existence of the Jewish people and the land of Israel?"**

There is an Aramaic saying that appears in many rabbinic texts (Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 39, Esther 4:14, Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:8, Gittin 55b-56a): **"*Shetikah k'hodayah damya.*" "Silence is considered akin to tacit complicity and agreement."** It is irresponsible to be silent in situations that call for speech or action.

And in *VaYikra*/Leviticus 19:16, the Israelites are commanded, "Do not stand idly by while your brother's blood is spilled."  
"*Lo taamod al dam ray-echa.*"

In a similar vein, **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** paraphrasing **Dante**, said, **"The hottest place in hell is reserved for those who remain neutral in times of great moral conflict."** In today's day and age, we cannot remain neutral.

In my opinion, **we cannot remain silent** in the face of worldwide anti-Semitism and existential threats to the State of Israel, **including state-sponsored terrorism by Iran**. I believe that each and every one of us **can still make a difference**. But only if we do more than just talk about how we feel amongst ourselves: while breaking fast at the end of Yom Kippur or socializing with our friends in other contexts. It is worth taking a moment to reflect upon **our ability to play a role in the future of the Jewish people**.

**Let's not make the same mistake that so many American Jews did during the Holocaust.** In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the American Jewish community failed to do everything in its power to stop Hitler and save at least some of European Jewry. As the Jews of Europe desperately fought for their lives, **the rest of the world stood idly by in silence**.

In January 1943, the Jewish educator, **Judah Piltch**, wrote the following words (in *HaDoar*): "And what will happen when my son asks me tomorrow: "What did you do while your brothers were being exterminated and tortured by the Nazi murderers?" What will I say? What will I be able to tell him?"

Addressing these questions, **Rabbi Haskell Lookstein** wrote a book (1985) entitled, "**Were We Our Brothers' Keepers? The Public Response of American Jews to the Holocaust**" " In his study, Lookstein documented and analyzed the American Jewish community's response to various key 'events' that took place between 1938-1944, including: **Kristallnacht** (1938), **the "Voyage of the Damned,"** when European Jews aboard the St. Louis, were not permitted to enter the United States (1939), **the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising** (1943), and **the deportation of 500,000 Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz in full view of the western world** in the spring of 1944).

After reflecting upon the public actions that American Jews took in response to these events, Rabbi Lookstein reluctantly comes to a very sad conclusion: **The American Jewish community of the 1930's and 1940's did NOT act as their brothers' keepers.**

This conclusion is consistent with the words of **Nahum Goldmann**, who, when looking back at his own role as a Jew living in America at the time, wrote, "We must stand as a generation, not only condemned to witness the destruction of a third of our number, but guilty of having accepted it without any resistance worthy of the name." (Lookstein, p. 205)

**Let's not make that mistake as a Jewish community again. Silence and inaction are acts of irresponsibility.** By saying nothing, by doing nothing during the Shoah, many people tacitly acknowledged what was going on & didn't do anything to stop it or to, at least, try to save some lives.

In light of Jewish history, we have a responsibility to be involved and active at this time. I believe that we need to **do our part to speak up against anti-Semitism and to keep Israel, America, and the rest of the world safe from nuclear threats and terrorism.**

Honestly, one of the things that I found most distressing about this past summer's debates surrounding Iran and the JCPOA was that there were some Jewish people who were opposed to the deal but who were hesitant to approach their senators & representatives to vote against it. They didn't want to 'make waves' because they were concerned about possible repercussions against the American Jewish community. There were Jews who wanted to **maintain a 'low profile'** because they don't want to be blamed for whatever negative consequences may have ensued from the Jews calling attention to themselves by speaking up.

Similarly, there are Jews who **don't like to 'make waves'** when it comes to speaking out against the BDS movement and other expressions of anti-Israel sentiment, in particular, and anti-Semitism, in general.

But, you know what?! During the Holocaust, many American Jews also wanted to maintain a low profile; that is why they didn't want to speak up loudly to raise 'Jewish' issues. Perhaps this point of view is understandable. Yet, in Lookstein's words (p. 207), "**To understand is not necessarily to excuse.** When one considers the pain and suffering of the German Jews in 1938 and the terrible agony of 907 trapped refugees on the St. Louis in June 1939, the reluctance of American Jewish to **speak out clearly** and demand relief for the victims must be considered a grievous failure."

**So I ask you today: When you look back at this moment in history, will you be proud of yourself?** Will you be able to tell your children that you **spoke out** and **stepped up** to do the right thing? Will your **children and grandchildren be proud of you?**

I am **proud** to know many people who were actively involved in **efforts this past summer to overturn the JCPOA**. There are those who attended "Stop Iran" rallies, as well as those who actively lobbied and otherwise communicated with their Senators and House Representatives, urging them to vote against the deal with Iran. Even as recently as 2 weeks ago, there were 1200 AIPAC activists who dropped what they were doing right before Rosh HaShanah to lobby on Capitol Hill. Understandably, many of these people felt disappointed and frustrated when their efforts seemed to have been for naught, when their attempts to replace the JCPOA with a better deal seemed to have failed. But, as AIPAC's director, Howard Kohr, said, "There are many ways to define success and failure. It's not just about congressional votes. There are other, truer, measures of success. For example: **Did we do everything that we could** to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon and from further destabilizing the Middle East? **Did we do everything that we could** to protect Israel?"

I believe that the fight that was fought by AIPAC activists and other Israel supporters this past spring and summer was **a fight worth fighting**. These pro-Israel organizations and individuals **served to “educate a nation”** about the flaws of the agreement with Iran. Even though some say that the JCPOA is a ‘done deal,’ and there’s nothing more that can be done, that’s just not true! **As this bad deal enters its implementation phase, we can still make a difference.** We can still do our part to mitigate the deal’s dangerous consequences. As ordinary citizens, we can and should keep pressuring our Congressional Representatives & Senators, to make sure that these elected officials work towards passing legislation that will make Israel safer and America safer. As members of Congress turn over during the next 15 years, we will need to continue educating them and urging them to be vigilant, making sure that Iran complies with the terms of the JCPOA and making sure that Israel has the resources to defend herself against an “unleashed” Iran (i.e. an Iran that had its economic sanctions lifted without having to prove itself in advance, so that it is now free to develop nuclear weapons).

In addition to knowing people who were and are actively involved in political efforts regarding the Iran deal, I am also proud to know many people who were and are actively involved in efforts to stand up in the face of **anti-Semitism on college campuses** and in other venues around the world. I am **proud** to know people who have worked and continue to work to educate and train college students and young adults to advocate for Israel in the face of the BDS movement./ I am also **proud** to know people who aren’t just standing idly by while global anti-Semitism continues to exist in so many different forms, from the cancellation of Jewish performers’ concert appearances to proposals for universities to divest from Israeli companies.

Again, I ask you: **When you look back at this moment in history,** will you be **proud of yourself?** Will the way you behaved during the 21<sup>st</sup> century **define you** in a good way? During the upcoming year, may we all strive to **behave in ways that define our life stories for the better.**

**May we all live our lives in the way that WE want to be remembered.**

*Ken Yehi Ratzon. Gmar Chatimah Tovah.*