



YOUR NAME IS WRITTEN ON MY HEART

Yom Kippur Evening

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By Rabbi Stuart W. Gershon, D.D.

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The sun has set. The stars shine above.

Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, the day of at-one-ment-- has begun. What need motivates us to spend most of the next 24 hours at temple? Is it not “our dreams and our yearnings for the life we still want to live”?

Yom Kippur’s 24 hours may feel like eternity. Yet, ironically, Yom Kippur makes us more acutely aware of the passage of time than any other holy day. We feel how quickly another year has come and gone. We recognize that we are aging, that time is flying by. We know that fewer years are left. We read in our High Holy Days prayerbook, “time flows inexorably; the sunset cannot be halted. So too, our days will come to an end...”

Neilah is the name of Yom Kippur’s final service tomorrow night. Neilah means closing of the gates. In antiquity, the gates of the great temple in Jerusalem were closed and locked at dusk.

The poetic imagery is clear. The closing of the temple gates symbolizes the closing of life. Time is running out. “Have we done all that needed to be done, said everything that needed to be said?”

It is with urgency that we must pursue our dreams and yearnings for the life we still want to live. Who will be fortunate enough to say, “I’ve lived a good and meaningful life”? What is a good life anyway? What vision does a meaningful life represent?

On September 16, 1986, Rabbi Kenneth Berger of Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Tampa gave a Yom Kippur sermon entitled “Five Minutes to Live.” Rabbi Berger spoke to his congregation about the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger that some had actually witnessed eight months earlier.

Rabbi Berger focused on the revelation that Challenger's seven astronauts, knowing that death was certain, remained alive for five minutes until their space capsule hit the water.

Rabbi Berger told his congregation, "The thought terrorizes me. Can you imagine knowing that in a few minutes death was imminent? What would we think of if, God forbid, you and I were in such circumstances? What would go through our mind? What went through their minds? ..."

Rabbi Berger imagined three regrets that might have been going through the astronauts' minds. And they all began with two words: "if only ..."

Rabbi Berger wrote, "If only I had known when I said goodbye to my loved ones ... if only I realized what I had when I had it. if only I could have another chance ..."

In the rest of his poignant sermon, Rabbi Berger implored everyone to love their loved ones even more, to show more affection and to express the love they feel. He pleaded with everyone to better appreciate their spouses, their children, their parents, before it was too late. Finally, Rabbi Berger encouraged everyone to get started. He wrote, "you've got today."

Less than three years later, Rabbi Berger, his wife Aviva, and two of their three children boarded United Airlines flight 232 from Denver to Chicago. The plane crashed and exploded on impact in Sioux City, Iowa. One hundred and twelve people died, including Rabbi Berger and Aviva. The two children aboard, Avigail (then 16) and Jonathan (then 9) survived. On the day the plane crashed, July 19, 1989, the Berger's third child, Ilana, (then 13), was at summer camp.

By virtue of Rabbi Berger's tragic death, his sermon was transformed from a good sermon to a classic. Rabbi Edward Bernstein writes, "in his words Rabbi Berger inspired people to action. And his death made those words holy."

Rabbi Berger's insights about the most important things in life continue to ring true. To the list of the most important things in life, what would you add? What is the life you still wish to live?

Rabbi Jack Riemer writes, "Before it is too late, let us open the gates that lead to truth, enter the door of beauty, go through the door of goodness. Let us open the gates to those things in life which abide eternally –before the gates swing shut, before the doors are closed."

Petach lanu sha'ar. Open for us the gate where no good word is ever left unsaid. Rabbi Joel Zissenwine wrote about a teacher who asked her students to think of the nicest thing they could say about their classmates and to write it down. The teacher compiled all the nice comments and handed each student a list on a piece of notepaper.

Before long, the entire class was smiling. She heard her students say “I never knew that I meant anything to anyone” and “I didn’t know others liked me so much.” The exercise had accomplished its purpose. The students were happy with themselves and one another.

Several years later, one of the students was killed in Vietnam. The teacher attended the funeral. The student’s parents were there too. They asked, “Were you Mark’s math teacher?” She nodded yes. “We want to show you something,” the father said, taking a wallet out of his pocket. “They found this on my son when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it.”

Opening the wallet, he carefully removed two worn pieces of notepaper that had obviously been taped, folded, and refolded many times. The teacher knew, without looking, that the papers were the list of all the good things each of Mark’s classmates had said about him.

“Thank you so much for doing that,” Mark’s mother said. “as you can see, Mark treasured it.” Then all of Mark’s former classmates who had come to the funeral reached into their wallets or purses and showed their lists of nice words. Only then did the teacher realize that all of her students had saved the notepaper with the list of all the good things their classmates had said about them.

Petach lanu sha’ar. Open for us the gates of compassion, empathy, and sensitivity that know no bounds. In 2016, 34 year old Laura Levis suffered a devastating asthma attack that took her life. Her husband, Peter Demarco, wrote a letter of thanks and gratitude to the staff of the ICU at CHA Cambridge Hospital who had cared for Laura during the last week of her life.

He wrote, “When she needed shots, you apologized that it was going to hurt a little, whether or not she could hear. When you listened to her heart and lungs through your stethoscopes, and her gown began to slip, you pulled it up to respectfully cover her. You spread a blanket when the room was just a little cold because you thought she’d sleep more comfortably that way ...”

“How many times did you walk into the room to find me sobbing, my head down, resting on her hand, and quietly go about your task, as if willing yourselves invisible? ... How many times did you hug me and console me when I fell to pieces or ask about Laura’s life and the person she was, taking the time to look at her photos or read the things I had written about her? How many times did you deliver bad news with compassionate words and sadness in your eyes?”

Petach lanu sha’ar. Open for us the gates of kindness and generosity. “There was a young man whose sole ambition from an early age was to be rich and famous. How this man wanted his name to be known! In time, he became a very successful businessman and he declared, “I will erect a magnificent building and name it after myself.” And so he did but some years later a fire burned the magnificent structure to the ground.

A friend asked the very successful businessman to visit a children's hospital. And so he did, thinking he would do so once and be done with it, because he was so busy working on an even more magnificent building to name after himself.

So the very successful businessman went to the local children's hospital and brought toys for all the sick children. To his surprise, the very successful businessman came back, again and again. He did not want to stop visiting the children.

After he had visited many times, one beautiful little girl said to the very successful businessman, 'I will never forget you.' He smiled and answered, 'That is sweet of you to say but I know that after a while, you will forget me.' 'Oh no,' the child responded. 'I will never forget you because, you see, your name is written upon my heart.'

My dear friends, the gates to the life you want to live are still open. Walk through them. Along the way, tell all the people you love what is beautiful and special about them. Live up to the highest compassion, empathy, and sensitivity that exists within you. Name the most wonderfully kind and generous people you know and aspire to be just like them.

And this above all - May it be said of you by loved ones, friends, and little children: "I will never forget you because, you see, your name is written upon my heart."

Gemar chatimah tovah. May we all be inscribed and sealed in the book of life for good!