

*When will I ever be myself again? – Yom Kippur Morning*  
*October 9, 2019 – 10 Tisrei 5780*  
*Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester*  
*Rabbi Daniel S. Wolk*

When will I ever be myself again?

Approximately a year ago, while recovering from a stroke, I attended Shabbat services at a New York synagogue. Before the kaddish a poem was read. I only remember the first line: “When will I ever be myself again? When will I ever be myself again?”

But the question remains with me. When will my life return to what it once was? Contemplating my illness, I wondered, when will I overcome the traumatic experience, the veil of darkness that had descended on my life? And as I reflected on this question I realized I may not be alone, for all of us have suffered difficult times— —a loss, a painful incident, whether physically or emotionally. There may be memories of times we wish had never occurred— —times of sorrow. We may still mourn the death of a loved one, a chronic sickness, we may have struggled in business or in our private life and lament the goals we failed to reach— —the shattered dreams. Life is never the way it once was. Most of us harbor some pain that remains with us, although we might attempt to avoid dwelling on it.

When will I ever be myself again.

Time has passed and I realize I cannot undue my past. I have to live with it. What happens in our life, the difficulties, become a part of us and we climb one mountain and often see that another lies ahead. The past is always with us

In 1959, on my first visit to Israel, the minister of the Scottish Presbyterian church invited me to Easter services to hear Handels Messiah. The singing was led by a balding elderly American whose voice embraced the entire church. After the service the minister introduced me to this man with the rapturous voice:

“George Smith, this is Daniel Wolk. He is in Jerusalem studying to be a rabbi.”

The color slowly drained from Mr. Smith’s face “Wolk? Not a common name. By chance are you related to Rabbi Samuel Wolk?”

“Yes, he was my father,” I responded

A tear made its way down the face of George Smith”. I knew your father. We were in rabbinical school together. I was raised as a Jew and wanted to be a rabbi. At Hebrew Union College your father and I were close friends. But then I had a nervous breakdown, dropped out of the seminary and came to Jerusalem. For a visit. But while I was here I found Jesus, converted to Christianity and joined this church. I put my past, my Jewish legacy behind me — —or so I thought. Now I meet you, Sam Wolk’s son, and like a

deluge my past descends upon me. All the memories.” With that, George Smith patted my arm and, head bowed, disappeared on the path leading to the Old City of Jerusalem.

As George Smith retreated into the distance I remembered the words of William Faulkner: “The past isn’t really over. In fact, it isn’t even past.” All that is positive in our life remains with us but so does the aching of the heart. Sorrow that torments us for years to come— And yet, and yet we do not need to stay in those inevitable low points of life.

How do we move forward? I will try to explain based on a very unlikely source.

I pause for a brief word of explanation. I am often asked; how do rabbis find material for their sermons? Is there a book that proclaims, “okay Rabbi, these are the themes you need to emphasize in 2019?” Some people conjecture that I Google, “Sermons for rabbis with sermon block”

So with that background I will now divulge the long sought after secret of where I acquire ideas for my sermon. The answer is--- Anywhere. This sermon was inspired by a middle aged salesman who worked at B&H photo in New York where I was searching for a pair of binoculars. The salesman handed me a pair of binoculars and also a little homespun wisdom. It is this philosophy from a salesman at B&H photo that I share with you today:

“If you want a fulfilling life,” he said, “a fulfilling life meaning the ability to rise above the difficult periods, I would suggest that it is determined by your attitude. In other words, attitude determines altitude. If your attitude is positive you can rise to a fulfilling life.

With this philosophy in mind, I looked through my new binoculars and not only did I have material for a sermon but my insight was also clearer, for then I understood, I will never be myself again. But I can always move forward if I have the proper attitude.

In past summers I have often spent time at a lovely Château in Provence. One day Marie Helene, the daughter of the owners, who was managing the Château as a B and B, came to me with an announcement: “Cher Danny, my parents have sold the chateau. You can’t come here anymore.” AT the time, I was sitting next to a field of lavender. Beyond the lavender were stumps of cherry trees that had been cut down. My heart also seemed severed, cut down, for myself because I loved the Château but also for Marie Helene.

” Oh, Marie Helene”, I lamented”, I am so sorry for you. What a loss.”

To my surprise Marie Helene smiled.

” Don’t worry Dan, I have found a new property nearby. Come with me and I will show it to you.”

Equipped with a map, and Maria H el ene’s battered green Renault, we set off on the D4 a main highway thru Provence. Then we turned off onto a dirt path.

“We are lost,” I said to Marie Helene.

“No, no” she replied.

“Look at the map. We’re in the right place. We just have to walk 100 yards.

We beat our way thru a field of thistles until, true to the map, we arrived at the remains of an old house. Actually, all that remained was a row of crumbling bricks.

With a smile Marie Helene exclaimed. “Here we are. My new house.”

“But Marie Helene, this isn’t a house, it is only a ruin of what once was a house.”

“Yes, Dan, I know, but you see in France we build upon ruins.”

In France we build upon ruins.

Our life may never be what it once was but we can always build upon ruins. That is the challenge – –to build on ruins. To start again whatever limitations, the future may hold.

The comic, Trevor Noah, in his autobiography Born a Crime describes his mother who suffered all of the hardships of apartheid in South Africa. Noah writes, “My mom told me life is full of pain. Let the pain sharpen you. Don’t hold on to it. Don’t be bitter.”

Your attitude to life can determine your altitude in life. May you reach a lofty altitude of satisfaction where you can discover contentment, fulfillment and happiness

A bitter sweet story: David, Henry and Allen study law together at the Cohen Law school and After qualifying they each go to different firms of solicitors. They don’t see each other again for 35 years when, out of the blue, David contacts the other two and they set up a reunion. The three are now approaching 60 years of age. After a lengthy discussion, they finally decide to meet at Bloom’s Restaurant, because not only are there wives unlikely to go there but also the waitresses there are young, pretty and flirty. They enjoy themselves so much that they unanimously agree to meet again every 10 years

Another 10 years go by and the three are now approaching 70 years of age. After discussion, they finally agreed to meet at Bloom’s restaurant because it’s a quiet place they can eat, talk about their grandchildren’s achievements, and tell Jewish jokes in peace.

Yet another 10 years go by and David contacts the other two. The three are now approaching 80 years of age. After some discussion they agree to meet at Bloom’s

Restaurant because the dining room is large enough to allow wheelchair access.

And yet another 10 years go by and the three are approaching 90 years of age. After a short discussion, they agree to meet at Bloom's restaurant because they have never been there before.

This story is both humorous and sad in its comments on what might occur in the aging process and the loss of memory, but I love the final line— They agreed to meet at Bloom's restaurant because they have never been there before.

Every day can have a component of that which is new, a realization that we have never been there before and that our hours can be molded as we wish. The acknowledgment of constant opportunities is very exciting if we are open to those possibilities. We are not who we were and never will be but there's always a promise of who we can still become and there is always the appreciation of this potential.

Some months ago I sat in a temple in New York City on the eve of Shabbat and focused on the first line of a poem: "I wonder when I will ever be myself again?" Now I ask myself who I want to be given the limitations life invariably places upon us.

And since we have spoken about 90-year-old men perhaps these words, from a 90-year-old man, can apply to any age, "life is a constant surprise to me" he said. "We never know what will happen next. Life is change, constant change---- But even after everything---I still believe that if we are lucky enough to be alive, we must give thanks for the miracle of every moment of every day"

On this highest of our High Holydays, let us give thanks for the miracle of every moment of every day.