Yom Kippur 5784
25 September 2023

Ashrei Yoshvei Veitekha
Finding Joy in Our World

It was a dark and scary room where the parent had just put their child to bed on Yom Kippur Eve. And then the evening battles began. The child calls out for his favorite teddy bear. A little bit later, the child calls out for water. And then, of course, he cries out because he needs to go to the bathroom. A little while later, he calls out again, asking that the bedroom door remain open and the light in the hall stay on. In frustration, the parent goes in *one last time*. "Sweety, everything that you can possibly need, you already have. There is nothing to be afraid of. I'm close by, you have your teddy bear to cuddle, and remember, God is always with you." In tears, the child declares, "but…but tonight God is sleeping at the shul!"

Of the 150 Psalms in the Book of Psalms, one of my favorites includes a verse we recite morning and evening beginning with the month of Elul and throughout the High Holiday season. אחת שאלתי מאת ה׳, אותה אבקש, שבתי בבית ה׳ כל ימי חיי – Just one thing do I ask of God, for it is the one thing I seek, to dwell in the house of God throughout my life (Psalm 27:4). I first learned these words as a song at Camp Ramah in a somewhat irreverent fashion. [Sing: *shivti*, *shivti*, *shivti*, WOO]. I've been thinking this year about what these words actually mean. If the house of God is God's Temple in Jerusalem, then the request here is a bit peculiar. How could one dwell in a Temple throughout the length of one's life? Even though on Yom Kippur, many people feel like we are doing exactly that. Think about it: Isn't the entire world, as that parent implied, God's house? If we think of the house of God as the entire world, and *shivti* literally means "situated," our prayer is actually expressing a basic human desire: to feel at home in God's world. We don't want to feel at odds with who we are nor alienated from the setting in which we live. אחת שאלתי מאת ה׳, אותה

אבקש, שבתי בבית ה׳ כל ימי חיי – Just one thing do I ask of God, for it is the one important thing that I seek, and that is to be settled in life and never estranged from the world in which that life is lived.

Of all the prayers we recite on Yom Kippur, have you ever thought about which one is the most central? There are a few possibilities, but *al het* – the confessional prayer – would likely be a prime candidate. It's with us all day. It's repeated in every single service. We can't possibly miss the urgent message of repentance, reconciliation, and renewal of relationships with God and humanity. What surprises me is that when we reach the final prayer service of the day, *Neila*, *al het* is suddenly gone. It seems to have served its purpose of expressing remorse, but clearly, something more remains to be accomplished. Believe me, we don't have Neila because the Hazzan and I lobbied for one more prayer service. The purpose of *Neila*, I believe, is the message found in its opening six words. You all know these words, words typically chanted in a sweet voice by the youngest members of our community, words that hold no greater significance than at this moment. אשרי יושבי ביתך, עוד יהללוך סלה – joyous are those who are settled in peace, in your house, in this world (Psalm 84:5). How many of us can say with a full heart that we feel situated in our lives as they are right now? How many of us can say that we feel no serious alienation from the world we inhabit? The 25 hours of Yom Kippur, and indeed the entire High Holiday season, can cleanse us, bring us forgiveness, and extend forgiveness to others. But, if they don't get us to feel at home in our lives, to embrace confidence and hope, then all the chest-beating will have been for naught.

One of my favorite Yom Kippur melodies from my days at Park Avenue Synagogue is a melody for *Shema Koleinu*, written by the late Cantor David Putterman. The music was beautiful, and it often got stuck in my head, but there was one line that was truly haunting. אל תשליכנו לעת זקנה – do not abandon us at the time of old age. With the canting of these words, there was often

deep emotion, frequently with tears. What was remarkable is that the strong emotions did not just emanate from the oldest members of the congregation but also from young members as well. One explanation could be that younger congregants were simply praying for their elders, among whom were their parents and grandparents, who had reached their years of physical decline. It might also be that they were projecting their own futures, recognizing with a kind of sobriety that we get these days that they, too, will face the December years of their lives. Or, perhaps this plea is not only about us becoming chronologically old but also the fear that the things we have cherished, the things that have animated us, will also become old. As we sense that we are moving to another phase of life, no matter how old or young, we often look back and think of the most precious moments that have been irretrievably lost. We are despondent because we can no longer reach the bar we once set for ourselves. We have trouble seeing or accepting that each phase of life has its own bar and its own unique way of expressing love for the life we have been given.

Kohelet describes a deep depression that these years can bring, declaring: “These are the years in which I take no pleasure” (Ecc 12:1). As if life’s lovability depends entirely on the pleasures, abilities, and skills we once had. This sadness is not just the elderly individual for whom driving, and the independence that comes with it, is now part of their past; it’s also not just the individual who can no longer extend hospitality to others with the same ease of even a year or two ago. This is about all of us. We all experience the changes that time announces from the moment we are born. Aging unites us all. This same sadness may also envelop the college student who cruised through high school at the top of her class and now finds herself among hundreds of valedictorians. She’s no longer cruising, and she longs for those lost days of trouble-free achievement. This sadness may also be a young father who misses the days before parenthood, fearing that the joy of freedom will never return. Or maybe it is those who have been through a

breakup or hurtful divorce for whom love is now seen as being in the past and unimaginable. Or, think of people in their 40s or 50s diagnosed with an illness they know will be with them for the rest of their lives. Those lives now look different, believed to be diminished, for they can no longer imagine having productive and joy-filled years. אל תשליכנו is truly every person's prayer. It's the prayer that we have the wisdom to renew our role in the world, to love it and hold it dear, to find tranquility in our lives, and to be faithful to who we are.

Rabbis don't officially take an Oath of Office, but if they did, it would be a commitment to guide individuals to have hope and to offer comfort. In his book, *On Consolation,* the former Canadian Statesman Michael Ignatieff wrote: "What we are searching for is how to go on, how to keep going, how to recover the belief that life is worth living" (Introduction). I know too many broken souls, prepared to toss in the towel. The comfort they need, the comfort we all need, is not radical or even innovative. Ignatieff, quoting the Roman Statesman Cicero, writes: "There is a form of consolation, extremely commonplace I grant you, which we ought always to have on our lips and in our hearts -- to remember that we are human beings, born under a law which renders our life a target for all the slings and arrows of fortune, and that it is not for us to refuse to live under the conditions of our birth, nor to resent so impatiently the misfortunes we can by no process of forethought avoid, but, by recalling to mind what has befallen others, to induce the reflection that what has happened to ourselves is nothing new" (44).

Later in life, Cicero suffered the loss of his daughter and found, at least at first, that he could not accept his own advice. Nonetheless, the consolation he's trying to teach here is the acknowledgment that even in our setbacks, we are deeply connected to others, to something larger and grander than ourselves. This may also explain why so many people find comfort in reading the Book of Psalms. It's puzzling because so many of the Psalms are angry prayers of vengeance

against our enemies. What can be comforting about that? When we recognize our disappointments, our pain, and our anger in others, we understand that we are not alone. Life can still be lived. Having been through such moments of challenge and despair, we can still produce beautiful and inspiring poetry,

On the whole, Ignatieff's book is a highly informative historical sweep through the millennia of human beings seeking consolation. You can read it if you want, but it's in a very personal epilogue that Ignatieff truly hits us most squarely and profoundly. He concludes: "Failure is a great teacher, and so too is aging. As I have grown older, at least one false consolation has dropped away. Of all the advantages that loving parents, class, race, education and citizenship conferred on me, the most incorrigible entitlement was existential: that I was somehow special. This was absurd, of course, but it was an illusion that sustained a great deal of what I tried to do. Failure and age gradually teach most of us otherwise. You shed any illusion of a special status that confers immunity from folly and misfortune and come to accept, willingly or otherwise, that you are like everyone else, prey to delusion, self-deception, and all the ills that flesh is heir to….It takes some time to accept the emergent sense of solidarity with the rest of humankind that begins to dawn when…..it finally hits you that you are yoked together with all others in a common fate. But these realizations are an unavoidable part of getting older, and they become a kind of consolation. You may not be special, but you do belong. This is not so bleak or so difficult to accept. It might even make you a little more attentive to the misfortunes and calamities of others and more alive to the ancient wisdom that has always been there to warn us not to be so vain and foolish" (258). Words have never been more true.

A colleague of mine was recently telling me about their 35th college reunion. At previous reunions, it was all about sharing accomplishments and a little bit of chest puffing. This one was

different. Everyone attending was asked to reflect on a series of questions, beginning with their most gratifying experience in life. One person said, “Making positive change in people’s lives.” Another wrote, “Watching folks who have worked for me get ahead in *their* careers.” What do you regret most in life? “Hurting people, especially those who cared about me along the way.” How have you fundamentally changed? “I no longer feel that my value depends on getting the highest ratings.” “I have more humility and more compassion for others.” What advice do you have for your classmates? “Realize that the envy part of life is now over.” And the ultimate truth: “Your kids and grandkids are not going to love you because of your resume.” What is the common denominator in all these responses? The common denominator is simply this: the receding of the individual ego. It’s exactly what Ignatieff told us about life and its consolations. The question is, does this really have to wait for the latter years of life? I’m hoping that it doesn’t.

There are two incredible and contrasting books about the profound changes that life brings and how we are going to react. You’ll decide for yourself which one offers us greater wisdom. The first is by Michael Kinsley, the former editor of the New Republic and Washington Insider, entitled *Old Age: A Beginner’s Guide*. Kinsley is 72 years old, and the Parkinson’s disease he was diagnosed with in midlife plays a prominent role in his reflection on aging. The book is well-written, funny, and immensely entertaining. But it also carries a dark pessimism. In reflecting on the life, career, and death of Joseph Kraft, one of the most prominent newspaper journalists of the 70s and 80s, Kinsley writes: “Joseph Kraft died in 1986 at the age of sixty-one, which is certainly insufficient, and was almost immediately forgotten by all except his close friends and family. This is the same group that remembers each of us – we hope. Joseph Kraft, I’m fairly certain, hoped for more. I do too. Neither one of us is likely to get it” (121). Missing from Kinsley’s book are the

words אשרי יושבי ביתך – what good fortune it is to be at home and settled in this world. I get the feeling that Kinsley, most certainly, is not.

Here is the contrast, a book I have quoted before, Dr. Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air*. The author was a young phenom in neuroscience and neurosurgery. He was much in demand for the stellar career that was beginning to unfold. He, too, received an unwelcomed diagnosis early in life, but in his case, it wasn't Parkinson's disease through which he could have lived. For Kalanithi, it was stage four lung cancer. The story is a tragic one, for sure, but as strange as it is to say and hard as it is to imagine, it is simultaneously inspiring and consoling. Kalanithi demonstrates that it is not just lives that are *changed* that can be loved and embraced; loving embrace can happen when lives are stricken with illness, even fearsome ones. When Paul Kalanithi was reading his own CT scan, after months of the cancer being heroically held at bay, he saw with his own eyes the new tumor that would change his life once again. Kalanithi wrote, "I was neither angry nor scared. It simply was. It was a fact about the world." He was only in his mid-30s, but he had aged in a way more dramatic than most of us could imagine. And yet, to him, what really mattered was how to remain Paul so that life could still be held close and treasured for as long as he had it.

There are two moments in Kalanithi's book that sum up all the wisdom he gifts us. The first is when it is clear that the mortality that he's facing is, perhaps at most, a year away. At that moment, he and his wife pondered whether to have a child with the sperm that Paul banked before his treatment began. Rather quickly, the two of them decided to go ahead with what we can only call a psychological high-wire act. They did this knowing that while an infant would certainly bring joy to them and their families, it would also add a really significant measure of psychological pain when the inevitable end would come for that infant's father. Here is what the author of this

extraordinary memoir reported about the impulse that underlay that decision. He writes, “Lucy and I both felt that life wasn’t about avoiding suffering.” Think about that. Life is not about avoiding suffering. Indeed, it is about a great deal more than that.

What more is there to life? The answer comes from the second moment in his book, a passage containing words that are among the most breathtakingly beautiful and hopeful lines I have ever read. Their daughter was born and, as predicted, brought joy to the family. Paul was in his last days and was now wondering what he could write to his infant daughter. He had no idea what she would be like as a teenager. No idea what would speak to her from her father’s heart. The words he wrote were poignant and deeply consoling, words addressed to his little girl when she would be old enough to read and understand them. “Cady: [You will] come to one of those many moments in life where you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world. [When you do], do not, I pray, discount [this]: that you filled a dying man’s days with a sated joy, a joy unknown to me in all my prior years, a joy that does not hunger for more and more but rests, satisfied. In this time, right now, that is an enormous thing.” Dr. Paul Kalanithi died in 2015. He was 37 years old.

The message here is extremely powerful. We have the capacity to fill others with joy, even if, like a small infant, we don’t fully realize it. Even a young man in the final phase of his life could find meaning and pleasure in contemplating the future of someone he loved, knowing it was also his future. All the more so in the latest of years and moments. That’s more than enough for an accounting of life. There is no such thing as too old, too sick, too disappointed, or too disillusioned to keep us from finding a settled place in God’s house. אל תשליכנו לעת זקנה – do not abandon us at the time of old age.

Next week, I will observe the sixth yahrzeit for my Grandma Miriam. In the final years of my grandmother's life, she was often confused and really only a shell of the person the entire family loved and adored. Nonetheless, Jodi and I would take our children, her great-grandchildren, to Florida every winter to see her. This is the same grandmother who stayed with us for nearly two months after Ari was born, so Jodi and I had a moment to shower. Now, she was confused about which grandchildren and great-grandchildren we all were. And then, we would put on some Jewish music, and my children would perform dances they learned at camp. My grandmother would tap her feet and smile from ear to ear. Who am I to say that this wasn't as important as everything she could do in days of greater vigor? שבתי בבית ה' - at the end of her 92 years, she was settled in life and in this world. אשרי יושבי ביתך – no matter the limitations of her age, no matter the limitations of her mind, she smiled and found joy each and every day.

Yom Kippur ends with words of comfort – affirming sanctity in every moment of life. To offer hope and consolation is to model in our own lives the recognition that life's joys and life's meaning are not meant to be measured on a quantitative scale. By the time Yom Kippur ends, we will all be a little older than we are right now, and we are all older than we were last year. We must not look back on what we believe is irretrievable. Rather, we must embrace what is new and cherish the joy we are able to give to ourselves and the people we love.