**Yizkor 5779 – Living a Life of Purpose**

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On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke in the chapel minyan about the ways in which we choose life and what that concept means in today’s world. Among other ideas, I explained that The Talmud teaches that there are “Three books … opened on Rosh Hashana. One of absolute sinners, one of absolute *tzadikim*, and one of *beinonim* (in-betweeners). ... Absolute *tzadikim*--written and sealed immediately for life. Absolute sinners--written and sealed immediately for death. *Beinonim* are held in the balance and stand from Rosh Hashana until Yom Kippur. ... If they succeed--written for life. If they do not succeed--written for death.

Most of us - likely all of us - are *beinonim*, in-betweeners. And therefore, the Talmud and RAMBAM teach us to think as if the scales of our righteousness and misdeeds were always in perfect balance. Therefore, each action we take, whether large or small, has the opportunity to tip the balance of the scale towards righteousness and life or towards transgression and death. And we are commanded to choose life.

The Books are a metaphor. But we use metaphors to teach important life lessons. Imagine If you could hold onto this idea that your life is in an exact balance on the scale at all times. How would it impact your decisions?

What would you do differently to choose life?

After posting this sermon on line, a friend commented that I should watch an NBC show called The Good Place. starring Ted Danson and Kristen Bell. The series, about to enter season three, is a smart comedy about what makes a person good. The premise of the show is that a somewhat less-than-ordinary woman enters the afterlife and is mistakenly sent to the Good Place instead of the Bad Place, which is definitely where she belongs. She decides to shed her old way of living and discover what it means to be a good person.

Like most of you, I don’t know what happens after we die. Jewish text and philosophy run the gamut of the possibilities, including rotting in the grave, an eternal afterlife, resurrection and reincarnation. Personally, I find comfort in the notion of an eternal soul and believe that we will somehow learn the objective truth about our lives and the universe. I also believe, or at least hope, that we can still see what is happening in the lives of our loved ones. I can find support, but no proof for these ideas in Jewish tradition, but if you were to tell me what you believe, I probably could find support for that too. We just don’t know.

Our tradition places much more focus on what happens in this world then what may happen after death. More important than getting to The Good Place, we must make this a good life.

What defines a good life?

Part of it is perspective – think of Lou Gehrig, being forced to retire from baseball due to the severity of his symptoms from ALS, now known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. Famously on that day, after having played 2130 games straight, Gehrig took the microphone and declared himself “the luckiest man on the earth.” And he truly believed it.

I was thinking about this over the course of the summer, as we learned first that Senator John McCain had stopped his cancer treatments, and then a few days later, that he died. Americans of all political persuasions were touched by his death. The attention he received was not only because he was a maverick or that he survived the brutal treatment at the hands of the Vietnamese for over five years as a prisoner of war. I believe many people were impacted by his death because of the way he lived his life, right up until the day he died.

In 2005, Senator McCain co-authored a book called *Character Is Destiny: Inspiring Stories Every Young Person Should Know and Every Adult Should Remember.* He describes his view of the Good Life: “So live your life that the fear of death can never enter your heart. Trouble no one about their religion; respect others in their view, and demand that they respect yours. Love your life, perfect your life, beautify all things in your life. Seek to make your life long and its purpose in the service of your people. Prepare a noble death song for the day when you go over the great divide.”

These few words encompass many important ideas:

* If you keep active, you won’t spend your time brooding about death.
* Have respect for other people’s opinions and beliefs
* Know your own beliefs and don’t be shy about expressing them.
* Don’t be complacent – always assume that you can do a little better than you have previously accomplished.
* Take care of yourself
* Find something greater than yourself that will give your life meaning
* Recognize that death is an inevitable part of life and be at peace with it when it is your time.

His sense of purpose came from public service – first in the Navy, then as a Senator and a Presidential candidate. He believed that there was something unique about America and explained that “To be connected to America’s causes — liberty, equal justice, respect for the dignity of all people — brings [sublime] happiness…. Our identities and sense of worth are not circumscribed but enlarged by serving good causes bigger than ourselves…. We are citizens of a nation of ideals, not blood and soil.”

America is a nation of ideals, not blood and soil. It was his commitment to those ideals that kept him alive in the Vietnamese jail and the reason he refused to be released earlier than other prisoners who had been there longer than him. This commitment also inspired him to run for office and to serve with honor as a Representative and then as a Senator.

I don’t want to idealize the man – he certainly had his faults, including his role in a financial scandal that became known as the Keating 5. I certainly disagreed with him on several issues even as I admired his leadership on other issues. But he lived his life with conviction. And he didn’t just talk the talk of respect for others, he walked the walk, quite literally and quite famously, when he would walk the Shabbat observant Joe Lieberman home after a late Friday in the Senate and proceed to turn on the necessary lights and prepare Lieberman’s home for Shabbat.

In his memoir, *Faith of My Fathers*, he wrote that “Nothingin life is more liberating than to fight for a cause larger than yourself, something that encompasses you, but is not defined by your existence alone." A cause that you can devote your entire self to doing, but it is never about you.

In his farewell statement, McCain conjured up the memory of Gehrig as he noted that “I have often said that I am the luckiest person on earth. I feel that way even now as I prepare for the end of my life. I have loved my life, all of it. I have had experiences, adventures and friendships enough for ten satisfying lives, and I am so thankful. Like most people, I have regrets. But I would not trade a day of my life, in good or bad times, for the best day of anyone else’s.”

The ability to say that with all of its challenges, you wouldn’t trade your life for anyone else’s is a remarkable statement for anyone to make, but especially for someone who survived the torture in prison. It is a recognition that we don’t get to just pick and choose our life experiences. We are the people that we are today because of the challenges we have faced, the love we have received and the choices we have made. It is not the quantity of time but the quality that matters most. Gehrig was only granted 37 years; McCain 81.

This past week, I took an opportunity to go see my grandmother in Cleveland last week for a short visit. Grandma Vera’s body has weakened significantly since I last saw her, and her memory continues to fade She is due to turn 102 in December, but the staff at the Nursing home have warned us that It seems increasingly questionable whether she will make it to that birthday. But even in this weakened status, she made the same remark she has always told me, echoing the words of Senator McCain – she wouldn’t trade a day of her life. Not because it was easy – she lived through the great Depression, the bombings in London during World War II, starting over in a new country, losing a husband to cancer at age 66 and a son to cancer at age 50. But what I’ve always admired about her has been her ability to acknowledge life’s challenges and still be grateful for the blessings that we have. Pirkei Avot tells us that Eizeh hu asher? Hasameach b’chelko. Who is wealthy? One who can be happy with his portion, however large or small that may be.

As we prepare now to call to mind the lives of our own loved ones who are no longer physically with us, I want to suggest that as you quietly whisper the person’s name at the appropriate time, think about what was his or her driving principle in life? What aspects of the way they lived their lives do you want to emulate in your own? Would they have been able to say that they wouldn’t trade a day of their life for anyone else’s? And finally, what can you learn from the way that those you remember today lived their lives and how might you emulate that spirt in your own life.

As I said – I don’t know if there The Good Place exists or not. I do know that each of us has been blessed to have people in our lives who influenced us in important ways and whose memory we will call upon shortly. As we do, let us re-devote ourselves to preserving not only the memories, but to living out the values that made them who they were, and helped shape us into who we are.