

Kol Nidre 5774: Celebrating Life!

At the erev Rosh Hashanah service, I noted that I could tell that a year had passed since the last High Holy Days, since I now needed my reading glasses to read my sermons, despite printing them out in 14-point font. I've had the same horrible distance eyesight for ages, but it's been a shock to me to see how quickly my close vision has deteriorated over the last several years. I know that I feel aches and pains more keenly, and it takes more time to recover from the kind of injuries that my children bounce back from. But seeing my vision worsen, sometimes from one week to the next, has really driven home for me that I am aging.

It has been about three years since I was first inducted into the ranks of Beit Shalom's chevra kaddisha. For those of you who are still unfamiliar with the term, the chevra kaddisha is our sacred society. It is a group of volunteers from the synagogue who prepare the bodies of our dead for burial. I was surprised to discover when we met as a group several years ago that it is the largest standing committee of the synagogue, with more than twenty members involved. A chevra kaddisha of four or five members is constituted each time a Beit Shalom member passes away. The group usually comes together in the evening before the funeral at Blackwell's Funeral Home in Glenside. The funeral home has a special room set aside for use by the chevra kaddisha of both synagogues. Our volunteers wash the body, dress it in the shroud sewn by volunteers, place it in the coffin along with a small bag of soil from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, and close the lid.

Preparing a body for burial is considered the greatest of all mitzvot, because the person who is being looked after can never repay the kindness. In my first experience, I assisted in looking after a woman I had never met. She and her husband had migrated to Australia and made the decision to cease any connection with the Jewish community. But she had explicitly directed her children to make sure she had a Jewish funeral. I felt fortunate that my first encounter as a member of the chevra kaddisha was for someone I did not know, so that I could acclimate to the experience. On that and following nights, I was very much an apprentice, guided through the process by women who in many cases had been part of the first chevra kaddisha group formed over thirty years ago. I found the experience profoundly moving but also intensely confronting. That night, I could not fall asleep. I lay in bed and vibrated, as though my body was experiencing a visceral reaction that it could not deal with. Since that night, I have served on four more chevra

kaddishas, all for women knew. I have been thankful for the opportunity to give this final gift, to show caring and gentleness for women who themselves did the same for others.

Being part of a chevra kaddisha is not for everyone; really it's not for most people. I'm sure most of you would rather be suspended by your fingernails than spend thirty minutes preparing a body for burial, and I can't blame you. I'm quite certain that if I hadn't worked for two years as hospital chaplain and encountered a number of people at or following the point of death, I would feel the same. Even now, I wouldn't say that I jump at the opportunity. But I continue to find it deeply meaningful work, and I feel like I'm doing something really important. I know many who serve on the chevra kaddisha do so in part because they hope that someone will do the same for them when they die. It is so powerful to know that we can offer this gift to one another.

Whether I like it or not, when I serve on a chevra kaddisha, I find that it is impossible to look after someone who had died and not be reminded of my mortality and that of those I love. We will all arrive at that place someday, hopefully later rather than sooner, and hopefully after many rich and wonderful years. But these bodies that we inhabit do not last forever, a fact that I'm increasingly aware of as the years march on.

Why do we fast on Yom Kippur? Why deprive ourselves of the elements our bodies most need to carry on the work of living? The Torah advises us that on Yom Kippur, we should afflict our souls. The rabbis understood that fasting was clearly implied in this instruction. The implication is that we're meant to feel just a bit miserable on Yom Kippur, and for sure we can look forward to that. But more recent commentators have observed that on Yom Kippur, we strive to take one day when we completely separate ourselves from the needs of our body. Essentially, we pretend to be dead. It's not fun, and we look forward to the end of the day and to the first taste of juice and cake. Over that one twenty-four hour period, we come to appreciate the physical pleasures in our world all the more because of their absence. When the day comes to a close, we dive back in to the world, bring our body and our souls back together, and we are one. At the same time, we can use this one day time away from our usual physical desires to reflect on how precious and fleeting our lives are. How blessed we are with the years we are given! Yom Kippur is an invitation to commit not only to being the best selves we can possibly be, but to living as fully as we possibly can.

I'm going to pause for a moment now to acknowledge those who are unable to fast for medical reasons. To you, I would simply say, "Good on you for looking after yourselves, for caring for the bodies God has given to you." I understand how difficult it is not to fast, especially for those who have become accustomed to doing so for most of their lives and then must stop. But Yom Kippur is about far more than depriving ourselves of food. What is at its heart is the spiritual work we will do over these next twenty-four hours.

You will probably think it decidedly odd that I consider Yom Kippur to be my favourite festival of the year. Okay, Simchat Torah is a close second, and that is about as opposite in mood from Yom Kippur as can be imagined. But despite the days of preparation, the anxious hours poring over my sermons, the hunger pangs and the exhaustion, I love this day above all others. Far from being about death, Yom Kippur to me is all about life. The day presents us with one of the most precious gifts of all: the gift of a new beginning. However old we are, however many mistakes we've made or regrets we have, Yom Kippur sends us the message that we can start anew. The cumulative prayers of the day serve as spiritual tools, urging us to examine ourselves with increasing intensity as the hours pass by. Yes, we will see parts of ourselves that we do not like, and it may well be painful. But when that shofar sounds as the day draws to a close, we hopefully emerge feeling renewed and refreshed. We have the gift of this day, and the one after that, and the one after that. Do we see afresh how we can fill those days with meaning and joy?

I have hosted a lot of visiting high school students in this last year. A lot. Most of them come from Catholic schools, whose curriculum includes a requirement that the students learn a bit about other faiths. One of the questions I'm most commonly asked is about the differences between Judaism and Christianity. I imagine many of them think of Judaism as being pretty much like Christianity, only without Jesus.

But Judaism is nothing like Christianity. So much of Christianity is focused on what happens to us after we die. Have we been saved? Will we go to heaven? Will we be on the right side for the second coming? By contrast, Judaism is all about this life. As I tell these students, I'm more than a little bit of an agnostic when it comes to what I believe will happen to me after I die. I suppose I'll find out when it happens. To be honest, I can't even be sure about tomorrow. But I do know that I have this moment right now. Being Jewish is about living in the here and now, making the most of each precious moment, even knowing that those moments will ultimately come to an end. And this day, this special day when we step back from the busyness

of our lives, when we even go so far as to cut ourselves off from the food that sustains us, this day is consecrated to pulling us back into each moment, reorienting ourselves to remember what is truly important.

The prayer U'netaneh Tokef states "Let us acclaim the holiness of this day, for it is full of dread." Yom Kippur reminds us of our mortality, but that may not actually be a bad thing. Science fiction writers regularly speculate about what it would be like to live forever. Would we set goals? Would we enjoy each moment, knowing that there would always be a next one? Knowing that our lives are finite, we invest more into each day, each hour. Let us dedicate this day to life, and may we move from here to embrace our lives every more fully. Shana tova--may we all be written and sealed for a year of good health, joy, and life. Amen.