

Live Like We're Dying: Erev RH Sermon 5775
Rabbi Leora Frankel, Community Synagogue of Rye

Part I: A Personal Wake-Up Call

Shanah Tovah. This is a special night, a homecoming for all of us as we hear that first blast of the shofar and announce the new year of 5775. As some of you know, our clergy and educator Rick Abrams took Rosh Hashanah on the road last week. Through a program called Big Tent Judaism, we offered a honey tasting at the local Whole Foods in honor of the holidays. Whether you saw us there in person or only on Facebook, you can imagine what fun we had introducing the holiday traditions to hurried shoppers milling around the store. We bumped into many Jews—some affiliated, some not—who wished us a Happy New Year. We also greeted many non-Jews, some of whom were quite curious about the friendly rabbi slicing organic apples in the grocery aisle. It was an opportunity to show off the shofar, sample some local honey, and answer questions people might have about the upcoming High Holy Days. You know, the usual: “When does the holiday start this year?” (“Wednesday night.”) “Does Whole Foods have any of those round challahs?” (“Yes, over in the bakery.”)

There was one question that stumped me though. “Why would you put honey on apple?” asked one woman in tennis gear who came over to humor us. “For a sweet new year,” I responded, the words rolling off my tongue for what seemed like the hundredth time that day. “Yes, I understand that,” she persisted. “But it’s putting sweet on sweet. Wouldn’t just one or the other be enough?” “Huh,” I thought, taking a moment to think about it. I’ve eaten apples and honey every year my entire life and yet never really considered it from this culinary perspective. I suppose a more refined palette would prefer a combination of sweet and sour or sweet and savory. I shrugged. “I guess this time of year we simply need double the sweetness,” I suggested to the woman at Whole Foods. She seemed satisfied, respectfully declined our high calorie treat, and went to check out.

But her question has lingered. Why do we need this extra dose of sweetness on Rosh Hashanah? Could there be a subconscious sadness or cynicism that we are overcompensating for? Do we just need a collective pick-me-up as the days get shorter and the weather cools?

This year in particular, I know that I do. From kidnapped boys in Gaza to disappearing planes over Ukraine, racial riots in Ferguson to beheadings in Syria, it has been a very difficult summer across the globe. And as some of you know this has also been a trying time for me personally. My father was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor ten weeks ago, and while he's thankfully doing quite well with his treatment, we know that it will be a long road ahead. In past years I usually approach this night still wearing the rose-colored sunglasses of a slower paced summer, ready to ring in the New Year. Well, in the spirit of these High Holy Days, I have a confession to make: tonight I am feeling a little more cautious, even frightened for what 5775 may have in store for our world and my own life. I need that extra dose of sweetness.

So how can I, how can we, begin the year with some semblance of hope and wholeness, even in the face of all that feels broken right now? How can we take life's inevitable bitter moments and transform them into even a little sweetness?

Now I typically turn to the wisdom of our Sages when grappling with questions like these, and I will in a moment. This summer though, I unexpectedly received some spiritual counseling from 2009 American Idol winner Kris Allen. One hot afternoon in July, I was driving home from Robert Wood Johnson hospital just having heard my father's shocking diagnosis, when a familiar pop song came on the radio. The catchy chorus goes like this:

We gotta start lookin' at the hands of the time we've been given
If this is all we got, then we gotta start thinkin'
If every second counts on a clock that's tickin'
Gotta live like we're dying.

Live like we're dying. It felt like one of those moments when the universe just speaks directly to you, albeit through the radio of my Honda Accord. Hearing these lyrics on my drive home from the hospital that day, I realized it wasn't just my father who needed to heed its message. What would it mean if I too lived like I'm dying? What if we all did?

Part II: 10 Days of Living Like We're Dying

This mindset of “live like we're dying” is exactly what the rabbis envisioned as they developed the prayers and rituals of these High Holy Days some 2,000 years ago. In biblical times, the climax of their observance was when the High Priest literally risked his life to enter the Temple's innermost sanctuary on Yom Kippur, the one and only day a year anyone was permitted to go that close to God. To prepare, he would make atonement offerings for the sins of the entire community as well as his own. Then, just before entering, the other priests tied a rope around his feet in case he did not survive the Divine encounter and needed to be dragged back out. Each year, the High Priest approached that holy altar with the knowledge that he might not make it out alive. (Reading this puts our high-pressured week in perspective. What's the worst that can happen tonight? You throw rotten tomatoes at the bimah?)

Even today, Yom Kippur bears vestiges of what has historically been a brush with death. Rabbi Jack Reimer explains it this way:

For twenty-four hours you wear white, you don't eat, you don't drink, you don't have sex, and (less well-known) you don't put on perfume or deodorant. Just look around the room on Yom Kippur afternoon, say around four o'clock, at a bunch of Jews who have been observing the above laws and customs and you realize you're looking at a room full of people who are [...] rehearsing their own deaths! Atonement, *shmatonment!* Yom Kippur is a day of death—the death of the old year, the death of the old sins, and the death of the old ego. [...] It is a day of death—so that there can be new life.¹

¹ As told by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner in *Yom Kippur Readings: Inspiration, Information, Contemplation*. Edited by Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010.

Rabbi Riemer's reflections are dead on (pun intended). These ten days that stretch before us are a celebration of a New Year and new possibilities, but they also signify endings and stir in us inexplicable loss. Perhaps that's why the blast of the shofar sounds at once so jubilant and jarring. Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav taught that when the shofar is first blown on Rosh Hashanah eve, a bridge is formed between heaven and earth.² This beautiful and terrifying image suggests that on Rosh Hashanah we somehow experience a collapse of both time and space, as did the *Cohen Gadol* in the Temple's innermost chamber. Going even a step further with this idea, Rabbi Shefa Gold teaches that each of us acts as the High Priest during these Days of Awe. She writes, "Upon the altar we place our lives and we face our deaths. Standing between Life and Death in the Holy of Holies affords us a rare perspective. From this place of The Between, our priorities are transformed."

Tomorrow morning as part of our *T'fillah*, we will read one liturgical poem or *piyut* that uniquely underscores the crossroads at which we all stand on Rosh Hashanah. Infamous for its chilling line about "who shall live and who shall die," the prayer *Unetaneh Tokef* invites each of us to step into my father's precarious reality during these 10 days, to live like we're dying. In its opening stanza, the scene is set of a heavenly court on the Day of Judgment with God playing every part: "Judge and Arbiter, Counsel and Witness." Then we sing, "*B'rosh Hashanah Yikateivun, uv'Yom Tzom Kippur Yechateimun*... On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: How many shall pass on, how many shall come to be; who shall live and who shall die."

This passage, maybe more than any other in the whole of our liturgy, troubles us (at least it troubles me), and for good reason. To start, *Unetaneh Tokef* is undeniably graphic, recounting a full litany of medieval death sentences from sword to stoning. We can easily substitute a parallel list that resonates with our own anxieties: "Who by car accident and who by cancer, who by starvation and who by substance abuse, who by heart disease and who by a broken heart."

² Lew, Alan. *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation*. 2003.

For many years I rejected this prayer as being counter to my own more transcendental theology. I don't believe in a God that sits on a heavenly throne, furiously scribbling each of our names in the Book of Life or Death between tonight and the close of Yom Kippur. But I was trying to read it too literally. Prayer is poetry, metaphor. And deep down, I now suspect that my resistance to this prayer was less about it being philosophically false and more about how excruciatingly true these words do ring.

It's ironic if you think about it. On the one hand, we have an increased illusion of control over nearly every aspect of our lives. We can customize our newsfeed and color-code our calendars. Breakthroughs in science have helped us harness sunlight, water, and wind to fuel our high speed internet. We can walk on the moon and clone human cells. Yet if you really stop and think about it, we have no more assurance than we did two thousand years ago that we won't be dead tomorrow. Reading the words of *Unetaneh Tokef* merely makes explicit what we implicitly already know but try to forget.

As Rabbi Ed Feinstein puts it, "The answer to each of these questions is 'me.' Who will live and who will die? I will. Who is at their end and who is not at their end? Me. Like every human being, when I die, it will be at the right time, and it will also be too soon."³ Whether or not we allow ourselves to seriously consider it during these next ten days, this prayer unyieldingly reminds us of a sober reality: that our lives really do hang in the balance. Not just my father's, but all of ours. And not just today, but every day.

Now I'm not saying that walking around with an acute awareness of life's fragility is a healthy thing to do all the time. If we accurately perceived every danger around us we might be paralyzed by anxiety. However I do think there is tremendous wisdom in Judaism's insistence that at least once or twice a year, we take a good, long look in the mirror and recognize that what we see could all be gone in

³ Rabbi Edward Feinstein, "The Answer is 'Me!'," from *Who By Fire, Who My Water: Un'taneh Tokef*, edited by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman. Jewish Lights, 2010.

an instant. And, eventually it will. To be clear, my intention is not to thoroughly depress us tonight (after all, you know I'm an optimist by nature). In fact, facing our own deaths isn't actually about death at all; we take a good hard look at death so we can turn back to what remains of our lives with renewed purpose and refreshed vision.

Rabbi Noa Kushner sums it up simply: “This is the reason we go through that painful list [in *Unetaneh Tokef*]; it is the reason we contemplate our own deaths and the deaths of those we love; it is the reason we force ourselves to remember that we have power in shaping our lives even in the face of real suffering. All of this works together to create a space where we can humbly ask ourselves, ‘What will I make of my life?’”⁴

Even if were to pose this question to ourselves on some other random Wednesday night, we are usually too busy or too tired to do anything much differently as a result. This is why we need all the pomp and circumstance of these services—the majestic music and piercing blasts of the shofar. The rabbis knew that we'd need to ratchet up the drama once in a while to warrant deeper introspection and genuine change.

I learned this lesson anew during an extremely theatrical moment in my own life this past summer. One of the unexpected “silver linings” of my dad's illness was whirlwind flight down to Duke's Brain Tumor Center in Raleigh, North Carolina. While he was medically cleared to fly after surgery, the doctors were concerned about his diminished immune system and ability to navigate a major airport. So some generous cousins lent us their four-seat propeller plane and a pilot to take us down for the consultation. Having never flown on anything smaller than a commercial jet and admittedly being afraid of heights, I was more than a little nervous for the trip. Miraculously none of us

⁴ Rabbi Noa Kushner, “From Text to Life to Text: The *Un'taneh Tokef* Feedback Loop,” from *Who By Fire, Who My Water: Un'taneh Tokef*, edited by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman. Jewish Lights, 2010.

got sick on the flights. Even more unexpectedly, I had one of the most spiritual moments of my life returning from that long day of grueling oncologist visits.

After dropping my parents back off in New Jersey, I flew the final leg of our journey back to the Purchase airport alone with the pilot. Knowing what a tough day it had been for me and eager to provide a distraction, the pilot got special clearance from air traffic control to adjust our route and fly straight up the Hudson River beginning right above the Statue of Liberty. As we glided up the West Side of Manhattan the view was nothing short of spectacular, a once-in-a-lifetime experience of my old neighborhood. To the right, the towering skyscrapers looked like Lego constructions and the loopy George Washington Bridge exit ramps, a toy racetrack that my daughter might send Power Wheels flying around. To the left of our tiny plane, the sun was setting, dipping just below the horizon and blinding me its fiery rays. Taking in both these sights I suddenly began to cry.

Unlike in the previous days, my tears were not of sadness or fear or self-pity at my father's situation but an eruption of profound humility. The views to both the East and the West were an unprecedented reminder of what *Unetaneh Tokef* (and later the band Kansas) expresses—that we are all “dust in the wind.” Looking down, I could almost hear echoes of God's rebuke in the Book of Job, calling out to him from a whirlwind:

“Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? [...] Who marked off its dimensions? [...] On what were its footings set? And who laid its cornerstone while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? [...] Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this.”⁵

In that tiny propeller plane, returning from the Cancer Center, I knew that I could not possibly comprehend, could not fully know the rhyme and reason of all that happens. Never in my life have I felt so small and yet so significant at the same time. For if I was indeed such a minor blip on God's radar screen, how staggeringly lucky I was to witness this vista, to occupy even a passing place among God's

⁵ Excerpts from Job 38:4-18.

vast wonders. For the first time since my father was rushed to the hospital, I temporarily forgot about how terrified I was that he might die and remembered how grateful I ought to feel for being alive myself.

Part III: How do we all “Live Like We’re Dying”?

So what does it mean to live like we’re dying? Gratitude, I suspect, is the starting point.

While looking for the lyrics to that Kris Allen song that stopped me in my tracks this summer, I inadvertently found a similarly-titled one by Tim McGraw. In his version of “Live Like You Were Dying,” a young man facing a terminal illness races to do all the things he might never have before—skydiving, rocky mountain climbing, bull riding, and so on. It is the kind of list you’d expect from a Country Western singer, yet now seems to me a little misguided. If you were really dying, you probably wouldn’t have the energy or ability to board a plane, let alone jump out of one. The more I think about it, the more I realize that living like you’re dying is not always about seeking thrills or making grand sweeping gestures. Counterintuitive as it may sound, I think it’s precisely the opposite.

To live like you’re dying is to appreciate and celebrate the smallest of feats—the ability to walk independently or share a meal at the kitchen table with loved ones. It entails becoming attuned to subtler meaning and cultivating awareness of gifts you typically take for granted. I’ve also learned that living like you’re dying forces you to say out loud what you naturally keep concealed in your heart. One of the many unexpected blessings of my father’s illness has been the outpouring of love and support from hundreds of his friends, colleagues and clients. Especially in those initial days in the hospital, people were posting messages and writing letters to my dad the likes of which are usually only expressed in eulogies. What a pity it is that we so rarely articulate these sentiments directly to those we admire. What a gift it has been for my dad and me to hear them while he is alive.

Trite as it sounds, living like we're dying means saying "I love you," before we hang up the phone, even if it's obvious, even if you've said it a thousand times before. It means not being too proud to say "I'm sorry" and seeking resolution in our conflicted relationships before we miss the chance. It means stripping down the guises, stopping the excuses, and working to become the best version of ourselves. All this is what it means to "live like we're dying," and all this is precisely our spiritual work of *Teshuvah* over the next ten days, beginning right now.

Now if "Live Like You're Dying" sounds a little too morbid to you, let me offer an alternative framing of the same concept. This past Shabbat, we read *Parashat Nitzavim*, one of the concluding portions of the book of Deuteronomy and our whole *Sefer Torah*. After their long journey through the wilderness, the Israelites are poised on the plains of Moab, just across the river from the Promised Land. Knowing that he will not be able to enter with them, Moses is delivering his farewell address to the people, a speech that moves from prose to poetry in its final chapters. He reminds them of God's commandments and warns them of how high the stakes are when deciding their future course of action. In this second covenantal ceremony, Moses charges the people, "I call heaven and earth to witness you today: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life!"⁶

Choose life. In Hebrew, "*U'vacharta Ba'chayim.*" These too are words that have been ringing in my ears for weeks, but what exactly did Moses mean? Do we really get to choose between life and death, between blessing and curse? In reality, each of us will experience life and death, blessing and curse, and most of the time we seem to have no control over when each will come. Just this last week our community was reminded of how haphazard life can be, with a funeral for a 44 year-old mother and a second Bar Mitzvah for our 83 year-old Rabbi Emeritus. Did these families, did our community have a choice around these bizarrely juxtaposed lifecycle events?

⁶ Deuteronomy 30:19.

Actually, in a sense they did, just not the one we initially might think of when we read the Torah's command to "choose life." While Kim Richman's family and friends would never have chosen for her to suffer such a tragic death, they did have a choice about how to care for her in her final hours and how to support her family in the days that followed. They chose to bring food and photos and most importantly their presence to surround her husband and children through their unthinkable pain. And Rabbi Rothman, still our teacher even in retirement, chose to take what might have been an ordinary elder birthday and turn it into a multi-generational celebration of Torah and tradition and life. (Not to mention that he gave the best Bar Mitzvah boy derash I think I've ever heard!)

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, observes that choosing life begins with asking ourselves to think differently. In situations like my father's, in the countless painful situations each of us in this room has faced and will face, Kushner observes that our instinctive emotional response is to wonder "Why?" But this is actually the wrong question, he teaches. We can't possibly know why human beings suffer, and even if could, it would not change the reality of our circumstances. Instead, Kushner insists that we should ask ourselves, "Now what?" Now that this difficult thing is happening in my life, what am I going to do?⁷ For my dad, the answer has been twofold: make meaning and make music.

It's true that we have little control over the dates of our birth or death. But that dash in between, what we make of whatever limited time we have on this earth, is largely in our control. Rather than seeing life as simply happening to us, Moses' final words and these High Holy Days urge us to seize and shape it. To seek holiness even in harrowing moments. To create the memories we hope to cherish one day instead of just being left with whatever recollections you happen to have collected over the years.

In the wake of journalist Steven Sotloff's gruesome execution this summer, the *Daily News* shared excerpts of two letters the young Jewish journalist managed to get smuggled out and sent to his

⁷ Kushner, Harold S. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Avon Books, 1981.

parents before he was killed. “Each of us has two lives,” he wrote. “The second one begins when you realize you only have one.”⁸ While we are lucky to be safe and secure tonight, relatively protected by the walls of this sanctuary and the laws of our constitution, our tradition requires of us a similar revelation. Our second chance begins tonight, the moment we realize we only live once.

The word *teshuvah*, often translated as “repentance,” actually comes from the Hebrew root that means “turn” or “return.” This is the time to recalibrate our spiritual and moral GPS, to make a total U-turn if necessary in those aspects of our lives that have gotten off course. We know that doing so will not avert our ultimate deaths, but imagine how it could change our lives.

Gmar chatimah tovah- may we all be sealed not merely in the Book of Life, but in the Book a Life Well Lived.

⁸ <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/executed-journalist-stein-sotloff-remembered-dedicated-reporter-devoted-jew-memorial-service-article-1.1929248#ixzz3CUPecFyQ>