

Yom Kippur Sermon 2017 ©
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One Day More

(authors note: to prepare to this sermon, the poems and the song that will be found in the text of this sermon were put into a booklet, and handed out to the congregation. Different members of the congregation were asked before the sermon to be the reader of the first three poems. I also put some marks on the walls of the synagogue about half way down the room. You'll understand why when you read ahead. In addition, two posters were prepared in large print for the two 'punch lines' of the story that also appears in the text)

A newly minted young rabbi stands on the bima delivering his very first Yom Kippur sermon. He wants to make a strong impression and so he bangs loudly on the lectern and delivers his first line, "Every member of this congregation will die some day!" He pauses and looks around to make sure that he gets the right response. He sees a somber look on everyone's face , on everyone's face **except** for one person sitting in the front row who is grinning at him. Maybe, the Rabbi thinks to himself, the man did not hear me so he bangs again on the lectern and repeats the first line, "Every member of this congregation will die someday." This time the man is not only grinning, he begins to laugh. Now the Rabbi looks at him and says, "Excuse me sir, are you amused by this idea? Oh no- the man replies -I'm not amused, I'm relieved. I'm relieved, you see because I'm not a member of this congregation!

OK maybe that's not the best membership pitch, but the truth is that whether we are members or not, we will one day die. But we would rather not think about that, we tend to live our lives in the state of denial of that simple fact. And then Yom Kippur comes along and forces us to confront our own mortality.

And so I tell you that story to begin not to scare you: Nope, I take that back. I tell you that story exactly to scare you - and exactly to scare me.

It is hard to believe that it is already sixteen years since the attack on our country simply known as 9/11 and throughout today's D'var we are going to read some poems written as a tribute to the nearly 3000 people whose lives were lost that day and to the families they left behind. These are written from the imagination of my college Rabbi David Kosak and taken all together they will be part of the message I hope to weave for us today.

So there is a booklet of these poems, we're going to take a look at the first one.

(first reader)

Poem #1:

*My dearest friend, my love, my wife.
This is the poem I would have left for you
If the planes had just flown slower
And this is the call I would have made
To say I love you one last time
To say I love you for all time*

*I cherished my days with you
the paper and the coffee
The vacations and the bills
Sundays by the lake
And soccer games
And arguments in the mini van*

*But the phone lines went down
And the networks went down
And the windows went down
one hundred flights ups*

We wake up every day, don't we, thinking that our life is a vast expansive time stretching out before us.

We wake up every day, don't we, with calendar in hand and things to do and places to go, with all of our important appointments

We wake up every day, don't we, thinking that we are in control

But we are not, we are not in control

And the world, the world seems a little out of control too.

A legend tells us that King David had trouble sleeping at night so he would wander the vast palace from top to bottom. One night he came across a door that he had never seen before. He opens the door, looks behind it and then slams the door shut, out of fear what he saw

What he discovered was that behind that door was the entrance to the Tehom and to the Tohu and the Vohu , the chaos that existed in our universe just before God came along and said, Vayehi Or -Let there be light.

At that moment King David discovered for him and for us that there is a very thin divide between our world and the chaos just beneath us.

The world is a palace built on stilts, stilts firmly grounded in nothing more than shifting sands so says the Midrash.

I don't think we need to be reminded of this truth this year, a year which has seen no less than the parade of natural disasters.

I wonder if there's anyone here who has actually survived a natural disaster or have you seen the aftermath first hand? The closest I ever got was visiting New Orleans a full after Katrina, and taken aback by how much destruction was all around

For most of us we usually see the destructive power of nature from afar as we sit comfortably on our couches watching cable news, thinking all the while we are in control.

We are relieved that our homes are not damaged, that our lives are not on the line. At least not this year, at least not this time.

First came hurricane Harvey with its massive storm surge and its relentless rains. 50 inches of rain! To give you a visual I marked how high up in this room 50 inches of rain would be.

Take a look, imagine if you can, that that rain was in your house. The wind and the water pouring through your windows and into your home, breaking your windows and breaking your heart with its destructive power with everything you own is now gone with the power and swept away with the wind. Then came Hurricane Irma, with its powerful devastation as it made its way straight up the middle of Florida, at one moment this hurricane was 900 miles from north to south and wider than the state of Florida. The damage to the Keys and now the damage to Puerto Rico by Maria is almost beyond comprehension.

Puerto Rico is just starting its recovery, an entire island without electricity or food or fresh water and in crisis still. This Island has already had an 8 day of Yom Kippur of no food and water!

And then, the ground shook in Mexico bringing down buildings in Mexico City, cutting off smaller towns as we watched first responders frantically working to free children as school collapsed around them.

The number of people who have been hurt or lost their life savings or lost all of their precious memories will never really be known.

(reader 2)

Poem #2:

My beloved boyfriend

This is the note I should have left

After I snuck into your room and dresser

And saw the ring sized just right

Sparkling through a future we shall never know

And I wonder how you would have asked

And I wonder how I would have said Yes.

Maybe, maybe we can imagine if we try the number of people who are waking to a new day today feeling exhausted and weary and sick at heart whose lives have been upended in just a day.

I can imagine just some of the questions going through the minds of those of whose lives have been so disrupted. They're asking how can all of this happen to us, our lives turned around seemingly over night.

They are asking when they look around and see the mud and the muck and the water and the debris that now fills what used to be their homes, when they look around and see the painting that they brought back from that big trip to Europe... when they see the pictures of their children's Bar and Bat Mitzvahs... when they find their waterlogged wedding albums and the videos of their grandchildren... and all those CHATTSKES that they cherished all these years... and they ask: How can all these precious objects now be gone in the rubble and the wind and the water?

They look around feeling lost and bewildered and confused and they whisper, what do I do now?

Is there any wisdom from Jewish tradition to guide us?

The first thing we learn whether we were in a hurricane or not is simply this: that our possessions will not and can not save us. During each of these hurricanes there were people who stayed in their homes for the very purpose of protecting their possessions and then they had to be rescued.

Did you hear that after Hurricane Harvey a group of wealthy residents from Los Angeles, who live on a fault line and for years have been expecting the “Big One”, rushed to but underground bunkers? Bunkers not in California but scattered around the Midwest in areas far away from flooding and earthquakes. Underground bunkers not to protect them so they can begin to store their valuable possessions there. They have not yet learned that things are only things and can not save us.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's first story, *Babylon Revisited* a man walks into a bar and sits down next to his friend who says to him, I heard you lost everything in the crash. He answers yes, that's true, but I lost everything valuable in The Boom. What I lost in the Crash was just money, in The Boom I lost my way.

This is the first thing that Judaism teaches us in the wake of a hurricane and the aftershock of an earthquake. Elizabeth Taylor after she was robbed one night of precious jewelry once famously said, I don't cry for things that don't cry for me.

The second thing we learn in our world is that no matter what happens that we are not alone. Didn't we all notice how many hundreds of people raced in to help those who were victims? Strangers got into their cars and trucks, hauling food and water and supplies and even small boats and drove hundreds of miles to help people they did not know and may never see again. If you ask me where was God in these hurricanes I will say God was not in the hurricane, that is that the work of nature. But God is in the hearts and the acts of these people who do all they can to give help and hope to those who were overwhelmed.

Our things can not save us, and we learn that we are never alone.

(reader 3)

Poem #3:

*We worked together for fifteen years
My desk was neat, his a mess
And I ribbed him about it every day
Today my papers are everywhere too
We talked about girls or the game
I went to his mom's funeral, he came to my dad's
We never married
Two middle aged bachelors
Who never found love
But who were friends and that was something
And maybe that's why
When we decided to jump
Our arms linked together*

There is one more truth that we learn today and that is that our lives are not in our control either as much as we would like to think that they are. Consider this story about how sometimes things out of your control.

A young woman attends the grand opening of a new boutique that her friend had just opened. She went to look at the bouquet of flowers she sent but when she saw the message she was in shock because the message the flowers she send said: (hold up poster) **Rest In Peace.** Well she wasn't happy, so she called the florist right away and the manager got on his computer and apologized and said I'm sorry we made the wrong delivery. The woman said, that's for sure, she said let's make the right delivery. The manager says, well the arrangement you ordered has already been delivered. So the people attending the Kaplan funeral were greeted with a wonder display of flowers with the words (hold up the second poster) , **Good Luck in your new location.!**

Sometimes things are out of our control.

Now I freely admit that I am not a fan of country music though I might want to rethink that. Why? Because I came across a song written by Tim Nichols and Craig Wiseman. It is performed by Tim McGraw and the title of the song is “Live Like You Were Dying”.

Here's the opening stanza.

*He said,
“I was in my early forties with a lot of life before me,
and the moment came that stopped me on a dime.
I spent most of the next days,
looking at the X Rays,
and talking about the options
and talking about sweet time.
I asked him when it sank in
that this might be really the real end,
how's it hit you when you get that kind of news?”*

I will come back to the rest of the song in a minute, but you get the question.

But just think. There is someone sitting here today I know who was healthy last year or was healthy a month ago or was healthy last week and came to shul feeling confident and strong. And then the x ray or the CAT scan or the MRI came back the wrong way and the doctor's face turned grim. One minute she had her cell phone in her pocket with a list of all those important meetings she had to get to and the next minute all those were forgotten. One minute he knew where he was supposed to be every hour and the next minute he was wearing one of those “stupid” gowns that allow you no dignity in the back and has no pockets for your cell phone or anything else.

When you go in a few minutes from the world in which you think you are in control, in which your schedule is so important, to a world of

waiting and waiting for the test results are the most important, that is a kind of earthquake too.

Can't it just stop you on a dime?

It's not only the possessions that we value the most that can be gone with the wind but more importantly that even our lives are not in our control.

Our lives are not in our control that is why we recite, "Who will live and who will die" in order that we may realize and not forget that we are not in control.

And that is why we read the poems from 9/11 today. One about the husband and wife with a life of memory behind them, one of the two lovers with all of their life in front of them and one about friendship.

Don't you remember September 11th? The first thing that we learned that day was to hold our loved ones close and not take them for granted.

Don't you remember that night? That night: We hugged our children tighter, kissed our family in a way we had not for years, reached out to parents and siblings and our closest friends in our community. We realized then as we realize today that we never know what tomorrow may bring, and that all we really have is Hayom today. So we should not waste the time we have on fleeting concerns.

Let's go back to the song.

So what are you going to do?

And he said,

I went skydiving, I went rocky mountain climbing,

I went 2.7 seconds on a Fu Manchu

and I loved deeper and I spoke sweeter

and I gave forgiveness I'd been denying.

He said

*I was finally the husband that most the time I wasn't
and I became a friend a friend would like to have.
All of a sudden going fishing wasn't such an imposition
and I went three times that year I lost my Dad.
Well, I finally read the good book
and I took a good long hard look at what I'd do if I could do it all again.
Like tomorrow was a gift
and you got eternity to think about what you'd do with it
and what did you do with it
and what can I do with it and what would I do with it.
Some day I hope you get the chance to live like you were dying.*

There is a sentence, a philosophy that found its way into Craig Sager Book Living out Loud where he writes about his battle with leukemia. He writes, *funny how time takes on new meaning when others tell you that you don't have much of it left (repeat).*

I believe therefore in the Yom Kippur message that reminds us that if we have something beautiful to wear and we have someplace beautiful to visit or if you have some experience you intend to have one of these days, in all these cases Yom Kippur reminds us that, as they say in Yiddish, *Chap – a – Rein* which means use it while you have it. Enjoy it today because **no one, no one, no one owns tomorrow.**

Our 40 something in our song goes skydiving and rides a bull but he does more. He works on becoming a better father, on becoming the friend you can count on, on being a better husband and son. He works on asking for forgiveness and on forgiving others. Pretty good for a country song.

Our young Rabbi at the beginning almost got it right when he told his congregation that everyone will pass from this world to the next someday. If he really wanted to get it right he would have told us that really all we have is today. Have you noticed that every single High

Holiday service ends with that poem, Chayom-today. All any of us really have is that.

And therefore we have today to remember that what is most precious are not our possessions, possessions that can be gone like chalom yauf- the mist of a dream.

What we do have is much more precious. WE have each other. What we do have is just enough time to make amends. What we do have is the love of family and friends. It is a frightening thought, isn't it, that all we really have are the 1,440 minutes and the 86,400 seconds of today. And I ask myself and I ask you, what if I could have not only one more day for myself but as Yizkor beckons, what if I could have more day with some of the people I remember who are no longer with us.

My daughter Leora somehow was on the same wavelength as I was writing this sermon and she sent me a poem that she had just written. The title is In Praise of Grief and it is on your handout.

*“Everyone I love I would lose.
It's really hard to wrap my head around that one.
The more I remind myself, the more real I get.
It inspires me to choose to love now,
to love even more when it's hard to
and I want to contract and hide.
So thank you grief for being my teacher.”*

Today I miss my Dad. My dad died of the young age of 57. I was only 24 years old still in Rabbinical School. I miss that I did not have him for any part of my adult life. He was not there when I was chosen by my class to speak on their behalf at my Rabbinical School Ordination. He did not stand next to me under the chuppah or get to hold my children as babies or any of the other milestone after that.

Hayom Today

Oh for one more day.

I miss my mom who passed on the age of 88 it's hard to believe 5 years ago.

My mom was British by birth and stoic by personality. But as she got older and more open to conversations I once asked her why she did not remarry all those years when opportunities were there. And she surprised me when she said, "I had the love of your father, I never needed more."

Hayom

Oh for one more day.

And now I ask you what do you miss today and if you could have just one more day what would you do?

That day is today.

My friends in a world that seems out of control I want to end by suggesting what we **do** have control, because even though no one owns tomorrow, we do have today.

And so let me not send you away with the message to live life like we are dying.

Rather let me send us away with the message **to live today to live every day to live life like you are living.**

Go skydiving and go ride a bull.

Live with joy and live with love, become the better husband and wife and parent and friend you know you can be

Live with purpose and live with no regrets, ask for forgiveness and give it too.

Live with understanding who is really precious in our lives.

Wrap your arm around life today
and you will enter this new year
unafraid and with a smile.

May we all be written and sealed in the book of life and health and joy.

Amen.