



## Kol Nidre – 5767 – “WHAT WE LEAVE BEHIND”

Thankfully, most days we don't have to think about our lives coming to an end. But we get reminded, now and then: an unsettling message from our physician about some unexpected test results; a close call with a speeding car on the Taconic; the funeral of a friend. My reminder came last summer, on a family trip with my younger brother.

We drove east across the Cascade Mountains, which divide Washington state. As we drove, the lush evergreen forests gave way to an arid landscape of sagebrush and tumbleweeds. The heat shimmered on the roadway as Rattlesnake Mountain came into view. Rattlesnake offered the only relief in an otherwise stark landscape. When I saw it, I knew we were almost there.

With little trouble, we found the cemetery. The well-watered green grass seemed a kind of oasis plunked down in the middle of the parched earth. My young nieces brought flowers to mark our visit to their grandmother's grave. They never had the chance to meet her, but, nevertheless, they chose the prettiest flowers they could find: a cheerful bouquet of pinks and purples.

We found the bronze headstone sunk into the green grass. It looked a little worn from its thirty-three year exposure to the desert elements. We saw my mother's name written on the marker. Just her name and the years of her life: 1930 to 1973.

She lived forty-three years before succumbing to a rare form of cancer. Forty-three years. My own life span, I realized. She was *my* age when she died. There was my reminder -- my encounter with mortality.

Yom Kippur is also a reminder of our mortality. Today, more than any other day on the Jewish calendar, our tradition summons us to confront our eventual end. Yom Kippur's traditions include many reminders of the fact that our time on this earth will one day reach its limit.

On Yom Kippur, traditional Jews wear a *kittel* to the synagogue --just like the garment in which they will be buried. On Yom Kippur, we neglect the needs of our bodies for twenty-five hours, denying ourselves food, water, bathing, and sex. Jewish law even prohibits our rubbing lotion on our skin. As one of my teachers, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, observed: on Yom Kippur, we treat our body like a corpse.

Tomorrow, we will read the *Unetaneh Tokef*, which reminds us:

*Our origin is dust, and dust is our end.  
We are fragile as pottery, so easily shattered,  
like the grass that withers,  
like the flower that fades,  
like the fleeting shadow,  
like the vanishing cloud,  
like the wind that rushes by,  
like the scattered dust,  
like the dream soon forgotten.*

Remembering those who have died is also a part of Yom Kippur. Tomorrow, as the afternoon wanes, and our fast grows heavy, we will have a *yizkor* service – a service of “remembrance.” We will think about those who have died, and recall memories of the time we shared. We will ask ourselves: what did they leave behind? What remains of them in this world?

I had traveled with my brother to visit our mother’s grave as part of my search to answer that question: what remains of my mother in this world? What *can* remain, after a short life of just forty-three years?

It seemed logical to seek the answer to this question by starting at the place where her physical remains lie, silent and peaceful, under a blanket of green grass.

It seemed logical, but it didn’t work. On that day, under the harsh desert sun, I didn’t sense that anything of who she was actually remained there. I felt no signs of her presence. The wind made a lonely sound in the pine trees; my nieces grew bored and went to visit a pair of swans who lived on an artificial pond nearby; the flowers we brought to place on the grave began to wilt in the heat. As much as I wanted to feel my mother nearby, she just wasn’t there.

As we drove away, I wondered what would happen if I were the one buried at the age of forty-three -- the age I am right now. If I died, that very afternoon, as the years passed, would my descendants know me? Or would they come to visit my grave out of some vague sense of obligation, and stand awkwardly for a few moments before wandering off to other distractions?

What would remain of me on this earth? What will I leave behind?

Have you thought about that question? If you were to sit down and write your own obituary, what would you include? The facts of your life, your date of birth, degrees earned, professional accomplishments, your “survivors” – spouse and children. Is this what we leave behind?

Back on the “green” side of Washington State, in the cool dampness of Seattle, my sister-in-law threw a high school graduation party for my eighteen year old nephew. The party featured a concert by my nephew’s heavy-metal band, known by the name “Die by Day.”

When I arrived at the party, I expected to find a mostly younger crowd, given the heavy-metal theme. But an elderly woman came over to me, her face vaguely familiar. She introduced herself and I recognized her name immediately. Dorothy had been my mother’s good friend. “I still miss your mother,” she told me, “even after all of these years. Every memorial day, I go to the cemetery and put yellow roses on her grave.”

I took advantage of the opportunity to ask Dorothy, “What do you most remember about my mother?”

Without hesitation, Dorothy replied, “Her kindness. She had a way of lifting people up.”

We chatted a little more, and then it was time for the concert to begin. I wondered if Dorothy would go into the auditorium to hear my nephew’s heavy-metal band. He’s a talented guitarist, but the volume was pretty loud, even for a seasoned rock concert veteran like me. But Dorothy went in and sat there, beaming, as she watched the grandson of her good friend play the music he loved.

I thought about the words Dorothy used to describe what she most remembered about my mother: “Her kindness. She had a way of lifting people up.” And there sat Dorothy, enduring the deafening heavy-metal sounds of “Die by Day,” doing so to show kindness to my nephew. There sat Dorothy, living my mother’s legacy.

I wasn’t so surprised by Dorothy’s answer when I asked her what she most remembered about my mother. When I meet with people to plan funerals for their loved ones, I ask them to tell me about the person who died. Without exception, they do not begin by speaking about professional accomplishments or success achieved in business. They begin by speaking about the way the person used to talk to them, what they used to do together, and how he or she loved them. Family members recall incidents of kindness that the person who died may have long forgotten. But this is how they are remembered. This is what remains long after we are gone.

These High Holy Days call us to look at our lives with a critical eye. This is the time when we examine our words and our deeds – a process that our rabbis called *chesbon ha-nefesh*: an accounting of our soul, a stark examination of what we are thinking, speaking and doing in our lives. This is the time to ask: am

I living the legacy I want to leave behind? When my family gathers together to plan my funeral, and they talk about how they remember me, what will they say?

Not so long ago, I remember hearing a lot about the need to write “ethical will.” In a “regular will,” we express our wishes in terms of our “estate” – the financial assets we have accumulated in our lifetimes. We leave our wealth to our loved ones and to the organizations that we care about.

In an “ethical will,” we write about our “spiritual assets.” We write about the values we wish to pass on to the next generation. We write about the most important lessons we have learned from life. We write ethical wills so that our descendants will inherit from us something besides property and financial assets.

My mother never wrote an ethical will. And I’m not sure she needed to write one. She lived her values. She didn’t need to write about how her children should always be kind to people, and lift the spirits of those around them. Her actions were kind and uplifting. Her daily life represented her “ethical will.”

If you died today, could you honestly say that your actions reflect your values? Would your family receive a spiritual inheritance from you –an inheritance received not just as words on paper, but as every day actions that reflect the best person you want to be?

These are the questions this holy day beckons us to consider.

Now when I think of what remains of my mother, I don’t think of the lonely sound of the wind blowing through the trees in the cemetery, or the harsh sun on her headstone.

I think of her friend, Dorothy, tenderly placing yellow roses on her grave, and then leaving the cemetery, returning to the realm of the living with all its harshness and hardship. I think of Dorothy doing what mattered most to my mother: living her life with kindness and love. I think of Dorothy, and I smile.

*Rabbi Jennifer Jaech  
Temple Israel of Northern Westchester*