Writing Ourselves into the Book of Fully Living

(Sing) *b’Rosh haShanah yikatevun, u’vyom tzom Kippur ye’khatemun.*

My teacher, Reb Simcha Raphael, ( “Teachings on Yizkor”) tells a story of Reb Simcha Bunam, one of the early and great Hasidic masters, who was close to the last moments of life. As he lay in bed, his grief-stricken wife burst into tears. With calm equanimity, the dying man looked at her lovingly, and said: “Why are you crying? My whole life was only that I might learn how to die.” And with these words rolling off his lips, he died peacefully...

How do we anticipate facing our own death? Will we feel peace? What might we experiment with in *our lives* to help us each learn to die peacefully?

Tonight I will offer a framework of what is happening over all during this High Holy Day season, explore the particular flavor of Yom Kippur, and offer a practice that might help us in our lives on our way to death.

At this season between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur the traditional greeting is “May you be sealed in the Book of Life! Gmar hatima tovah!” Last week, and again tomorrow we sing, “On Rosh HaShanah it is written and on the fast of Yom Kippur it is sealed who will live and who will die.” Our traditional metaphors of this season present us with a vision of two books- the Book of Life, and the Book of Death, and tell us that *teshuvah, u’tefillah, u’tzedakah* determine in which book we might find ourselves this year. And so our *tefillot* include empassioned singing, and the beating of our breasts. Many of us abstain from food and drink. We wear white. We prostrate ourselves fully.

In short, we engage in some pretty “high drama” because our ancestors deemed *these* practices to be a tried and true means of helping us realign ourselves- setting us up for a chiropractic adjustment of sorts. When the mahzor was first getting edited, and over the years as it and the accompanying practices and prayers became codified, our ancestors knew that as humans we have a deep aversion to death. And they knew that for us to die at peace, we must live fully, which means we must face our death fully. We must open to that ultimate of all losses, for only in doing so can we truly step into life.

They then crafted a series of various embodied, experiential practices that have been passed down through the generations. These practices do not start and end with Yom Kippur, but rather with the autumn new moon. On Rosh HaShanah our bodies reverberate from the vibrations of the shofar; we lay ourselves down- on the ground, or on the back of the chair in front of us; we eat numerous symbolic foods. On Yom Kippur, we face our death as described above. Just 5 days later, under a bright full moon we sit in our Sukkah for what the rabbis of the Talmud called “THE holiday,” *HeHag.*

During this holiday we spend as much time as possible in a simple, open, structure for one complete cycle of time, **experiencing** the sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, earth, sky, clouds through almost non-existent walls and roof as we wave exotic species of plants in the six directions around us. We sink into joy knowing that a few days prior we have faced our vulnerability instead of having run from it.

Finally, the High Holyday season concludes one short week later. We gather to celebrate the Torah, our sacred stories and teachings, and the record of our ancient relationship with one another, and with God; a record that informs each of our lives to some extent even today, several thousand years after these words first came into being. And we dance in joy and gratitude for being in this stream of peoples, histories, questioning, searching, celebrating, supporting and so much more. That is the big picture. Our ancestors offer us the gift of so many varied means that are designed to work in concert with one another, creating one large, more sustainable experience than - for example- an intensive month long retreat away from home. Although at times their close proximity in date to one another and intensity can cause us to deeply desire a break, in fact these carefully designed series of holy days and practices are all simply a gift from our ancestors to us, their descendants, as some support on this journey of being human.

And so today and tomorrow, we lift up the part of our journey that focuses on death.

Today’s sermon is simple and direct. Yom Kippur tries to help us sink into the truth that we all know intellectually- that we all will die, and it could be any moment. And yet, for most of us we still go on with life as if it is most likely that we will NOT die any moment, because that is *also* true. So what can we do?

Sometimes the experiences of friends or family members, or even words that doctors have told some of us here today, remind us that in fact we will likely die *very* soon. When I hear stories like that, I usually also hear that this death sentence - whether or not it fully pans out- often has a very thick silver lining. In facing impending death, many people become very clear about what is truly important.

In the words of the country song, *Live Like You Are Dying (*by Tim McGraw,) a father with a terminal illness tells his son how he dealt with the diagnosis:

*“I went skydiving*

*I went Rocky Mountain climbing*

*I went 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fumanchu”*

*"I was finally the husband*

*That most of the time I wasn't*

*And I became a friend a friend would like to have*

*And I loved deeper*

*And I spoke sweeter*

*And I gave forgiveness I'd been denying"*

*"And I spoke sweeter*

*And I watched an eagle as it was flying"*

*And he said*

*"Someday I hope you get the chance*

*To live like you were dying*

*To live like you were dying*

*To live like you were dying"*

For those of us here, what would we do- or are we doing - differently as a result of such a diagnosis? If we knew that we would never see a loved one again, or even a friend that we were once close with, how might that impact our choices? Is there anything we might regret not having said or done?

How might we each become *“[the spouse] that most of the time [we] aren’t,*

*[And the] friend a friend would like to have”?*

What will help us *“love deeper,... and speak sweeter”?*

What can help? Stepping outside of our own ego perspective to witness the world more fully around us, from the eagles flying to the people we encounter.

This past summer I had such an opportunity.

As one of five children who are scattered across this country, it is often hard to get together with all my siblings. The last time I remember this happening was six years ago, before some of my nieces and nephews were even born. This summer, however, we were able to finally all get together, and to spend some quality time with one another sharing on this level.

For my siblings and myself, fortunately it does not feel unusual to share openly. However, this time the experience was particularly poignant. 1. We are all older. 2. We had had more time to sink in with each other, and to catch up face-to-face about the personal challenges and successes in each of our lives. Our hearts opened more deeply to one another in this rare window of connection as the tears overflowed down our faces, knowing that we really don’t know when we will all gather again in person, even as we hope to do so more regularly.

To be clear, since I am human, not all of my relationships look like this, and in fact earlier this summer I had a quite surprising encounter with my childhood friend’s husband in a way that completely and entirely caught me off guard, even though we have been in each other’s lives for about 20 years. Our interaction that day reminded me of assumptions I make, and of the need for building relationships through witnessing and asking the questions that we sometimes forget to ask about another’s formative experiences.

But this is not about me. It’s simply about possibilities of living more fully that exist when we take the time to reflect on the impact of our interactions on ourselves, our closer “others,” and even those with whom we have passing encounters.

Now some of us have unsafe family or acquaintance relationships. To be clear: I am not asking anyone to put themself in danger.

However, in situations that are not about safety, some of us still hold rather large hurts and misunderstandings that have existed for varying amounts of time. In these cases we still might benefit from witnessing the other in their reality, and seeing what happens. It might mean we need to ask ourselves: can I put aside my hurt to some extent and make space to see or hold the other beyond the surface level?

I’m not asking us to negate “our reality” and experiences, but rather to just put that aside… and to try to do so completely, for the moment… Can we see things from the perspective of the other? What are they trying to do with their lives? What is important to them? It might even be radically different from what we hold dear, but can we honor the person and what they are trying to do in the world? Can we acknowledge and honor them for their accomplishments, struggles, hard work, and deepest desires? It’s not about whether share the same views, or would make the same choices. It’s about witnessing loved ones, and letting them know we see beyond their masks.

If speaking face to face is too hard, can we write a letter?

If we stop and look and listen a little more carefully to those around us, we will see that this kind of perspective can extend even further. We each have the unique opportunity any moment to simply acknowledge those around us for what we notice they might be holding, or going through, or just how they are right then.

When we see someone who is excited, do we notice its impact on us? Hopefully it’s positive. In such a case we might say, “Wow! It brings such a sparkle to me when your joy overflows in that way. Thank you!”

When we encounter someone who is having the opposite experience we might say, “It seems like you’re having a really hard day. I’m so sorry. I’m holding you in my heart/ prayers and sending you blessings/ good thoughts/ peace.”

We don’t need to know the details.

We don’t need to know the person.

And if we feel too uncomfortable verbalizing any of this, we don’t need to. Just having such an intention towards those around us can be powerful.

That is the gift of Yom Kippur, and of facing our death. We are encouraged to look behind the masks that we, and others, usually wear, and to act from that place. In fact, true morbidity lies in acting as if the *masks* we each wear are really who we each are, and solely interacting at that level. That leads to a life of certain death.

Which brings us back to the beginning: who will get written into the Book of Life this year? It depends on each one of us. Not because our actions can sway a God we may or may not believe in to make a decision that rewards us with a “gold star” and living another year as a result of the “good” we did this year, but because when we *really are doing “good,”* then we are more enlivened, and we know in our souls that we are in alignment. And when we are honest with ourselves, seeing our masks for what they are, and looking behind them to our own deep fears, passions, and hopes, we can likewise look for the fears, passions and hopes in others...a truly transformational act.

Actions like these empower us to write ourselves into this Book of Fully Living. We don’t know when and how we will die. But we *can* make choices about how we are living.

So how will you choose to live this year?

Tomorrow, I hope you’ll come to the aleph or bet Yom Kippur service to hear some of the powerful story about a near-death experience and its impact on one in our own community, right here.

May we each be written into the Book of Life, or really, may we each *write ourselves* into the Book of Fully Living. Amen.