

**A Minute to Midnight:
Leaving a Legacy of Life
Kol Nidrei 5762
September 26, 2001**

There is an image in my mind that will not go away. It's not the towers, or the planes, the rubble or the dust. It's the last-second calls, from those phones in the sky. Can you imagine? Off you go, on a routine trip, "see you for supper tomorrow night, honey," then, suddenly, you've got mere seconds left, to say what you want to say.

I remember the very first time I went out of town after Benjamin was born. I flew off to a convention, but as my wife and son strolled away from the gate, as the plane was boarding, I kept staring after their retreating forms. What if something happens? What if this is the last image I ever have of my family? Or theirs, of me? He was so young, he was a few months old. Would he even, could he even remember me?

The New York Times reported on Sunday that to add to all the otherwise obvious pain of this month's attacks, there are 1500 children left without at least one of their parents. What will they know of the men and women who brought them in to this world? Of their hopes, their dreams, their wishes for their children. Of what they wanted to teach, and could not.

And now, I just can't get those cell phone calls out of my mind. It's a minute to the midnight of our lives. What would you do? What would you say?

On this Yom Kippur eve, I had planned to speak about Israel. Not about political positions or the peace process, but about its meaning in our lives, its place in our identity, its subtle centrality in the complex make-up of who we are and who we can be as Jews.

Instead of spiritual identity, however, what I am going to speak about is the transmission of values at a time of crisis. Of how we don't want to ever, ever be in a position of wanting to convey something to our loved ones, and not having the chance to do it. Of a way in which we can say what we want to say today, because we never know what tomorrow will bring.

Some people spend a lot of time thinking about dealing out their worldly goods when their days on earth are done. Most of us can tell tales of family fights over precious possessions, conflicts over keepsakes, smoldering resentment over heirlooms snatched up by one side or the other. Rules of inheritance are treated at length in law and lore, the complex stipulations of the state, and the ever-present motif in folktales of heroes inheriting half the kingdom.

Judging from its universal power, >who gets what= must be one of the basic primal forces of the human psyche.

So we spend time thinking of the disposition of our things. And: we spend time thinking about the fate of our bodies. Writing Living Wills we try to anticipate, and prepare for, the painful practical questions that come towards the end of life.

But there is more to the challenge of mortality than the giving away of goods. And there is more to challenge of facing death than what happens to our bodies.

We have another kind of gift we can give. It is a spiritual inheritance, not a physical one. It is a wisdom tradition, stories of how to be, ways to pass on lessons learned in life.

There is a Jewish tradition that transcends the limits of living days, that lets voices speak to us from beyond the grave. Do you remember the dream scene in *Fiddler on the Roof*? A clever Tevye plays on Golda's conviction that the will of our ancestors can, indeed, make itself felt in the course of our lives.

But dreams from the Other Side aren't all that reliable. If you want your voice heard, better not leave it up to your kids to get in touch with you. And if you want those who are close to you to know what is in your heart, best not put it off, until some comfortably right moment or more convenient time. For as we learned this month, we are simply not the timekeepers of our own existence.

From the very first, from the dawn of Judaism when parents weighed words of blessing to their children as one of the most significant acts in their lives, we Jews have sought to leave a legacy of life. Our tradition tells us to take an extra step: we have legal wills. Now, we have living wills. But in thinking about our lives, we should leave *Ethical Wills* as well.

Rabbi Jack Riemer writes that many of us have documents in which our parents set down the ideals that meant the most to them, the core values they would like their children to cherish. What most people do not know was that, in doing this, their parents were practicing an ancient Jewish custom.

When we share our values with others, we learn things about ourselves. Often, when wills are shared while parents are still alive, children are surprised to learn some of the things that are so important to their parents, and *parents* are surprised that their children didn't know how strongly they felt about these things.

"Ethical wills have the power to make [you] confront the ultimate choices you must make in your life. They can make people who are... preoccupied with earning a living stop and consider what they are living for." (Reimer) Most of all, ethical wills are about promises: a memory of yesterday, a dream of tomorrow.

***Kol Nidrei*: a whisper of wings, as promises are remembered.**
This night, we are reminded of the power of promises.

Long ago on a lonely mountain, our ancestors made a pledge for all time: in exchange for the gift of Torah, they said, we will become teachers and models. Tellers of stories, and bearers of life. We take upon ourselves the task: to pass a precious legacy on to the generations to come.

We have come a long way since Sinai. But the journey is not over. As Tolkein put it, "the road goes ever on and on," farther than any eye can see, unfolding still. And, we: we stand in the middle of the path, steadfast keepers of the pledges of the past, shapers -- if only we will take on the task -- of the promise of the future. **On us falls a two-fold duty: to respond to the voices that call our names in the night. And to be the authors of our own visions, of what is yet to be.**

Whispers on the wind. Listen to the ones who call to us.

Rabbi Moshe Yehoshua Zelig, in Latvia in the 19th century, wrote to his children that "if there should befall some anxiety, God forbid, immediately eliminate anguish from your heart. Think instead how insignificant this is compared to all the troubles that are possible...having to go begging from door to door, naked; being sentenced to flogging; being sent to Siberia."

Or these voices, from the Kingdom of the Night, words that found their way to the light of day even as the victims did not. Carved on the walls of synagogues or scribbled on the covers of partly burnt books, in chalk on small boards or scattered in the smoldering ruins of liquidated ghettos, ethical wills from the Holocaust are, occasionally, uplifting, stirring testimony to the indomitable nature of the human spirit.

Hear these words from the last Jew of Kovno: "Brothers. Avenge us! We were once more that fifty thousand souls in Kovno, and now there remain but a few. Our revenge will come when you destroy the very last of the wild beasts.= Or this: >I am a daughter of Israel, twenty years old. O how lovely is the world about us! Why should they destroy us when everything within me desires and yearns for life? Have my last minutes really arrived? Come avenge me, whoever reads this last request of mine."

Listen to one Shulamit Rabinovitch, writing to her sons who had escaped to America: "It is not difficult for me to die, or for Papa either. What is hard, infinitely hard, is the fact that your younger brother Shmuel will die when we do. And he's such a wonderful boy. Even under the most brutal conditions he developed into a fine human being... How few of those who suffered this treatment retained the human image! It didn't really pay for us to hold out and suffer so long and then not to survive. For years we learned so much, we suffered so much. We could teach others so very much, and it is too bad that it all comes to nothing, along with us. Were we to be rescued we could dry up the oceans, and demonstrate with how little a person can get along. If I only could bequeath to you the ability to get along and the ability to do everything for yourself, then you, being free, could never be unhappy. Dear children: be good human beings and loyal sons of your people. Never abandon your land or your people. Fight for freedom and social justice. Know how

to appreciate your good fortune and use it not for yourselves alone, but for others both near and distant... And don't mourn for us with tears and words, but rather with deeds. I am leaving this world with almost a clear conscience. I lived my life. I have no complaints to anyone... I kiss you very warmly." Shulamit Rabinovitch's Ethical Will to her sons was dated June 6, 1944. Half a continent away, that very day, redemption began. But it was too late for her.

It is not too late for us. With the Ethical Wills already in our hands we can look into the past. With the words we write, we can shape the future.

You don't need to be an accomplished writer. And you don't need to fill pages. One woman wrote, simply: "This is what I want from you children... to be to one another good sisters and brother. Daddy and I love the three of you very much. We did our best in raising you, and gave you the best education we could afford. Be good to one another. Help one another if 'God forbid' in need. This is my wish. Love all of you. Your mother."

Try to be positive. You won't be able to change the tone later. And there are limits to what we can expect of those who come after us. One rabbi wrote out a detailed schedule for his children, dividing each day into half hour blocks.

But this night I urge you to take up the task. Just do it. We avoid heavy subjects because we do not want to deal with our own mortality. Fine. So think of it as a first draft. To be revised when you get around to it. But remember: young or old, it does not matter. We never know what tomorrow will bring. A fire. An accident. A storm. A plane falling out of the sky.

Remember: some of the words we heard were written by those in their twenties. All of us have something to say. Too often it is only during a meeting about a eulogy that children even learn how their parents met. Much less what they cared about the most.

Focus on events or mistakes, people or places, causes you care about, the world from which you came, the world you would like to see. Let not the journey of your life be lost in the veil of time.

The pen has passed into our hands. It may be a keyboard, or camcorder today, but the opportunity, indeed, the obligation remains the same. **As we write, we will define ourselves. What will be the content of our concerns, the lasting value, the legacy of our lives?**

To my children. To Benjamin and Daniel and Talia: you are the gems of my soul, the breath of my dreams. It is late at night as I write these words. You are asleep. *Finally* asleep. And, just this week for Talia, *finally* sleeping through the night! You keep a daily appointment with your own dreams.

Sweet dreams, we say, and may they ever be so. May your spirits soar, your vision be keen, your hopes and goals break the bounds that others would put upon you, the stranglehold of external expectations, the limits of class, or gender, or race. Talia, my daughter: may a whole world be open to you, that was closed to women a short time ago. May you be who and what you want to be.

May your smiles stay with you as well, the wonder, the giggles, the joy in new discovery that lights up your faces. May you never squelch those squeals of delight, that inner child. People may be mean, or angry, self-serving or vicious. But may you always be open, willing to trust. May you never yield to cynics.

Much that is bad will happen in your lives. Some things may seem impossible to bear. Last year a friend lost his seven-year old, drowned at camp. I do not know how they are going on. But they are. This year something terrible happened, which you do not understand, but which will affect you, which you will learn about as you grow. My children, no matter what may come, no matter how dark the hour, may you always look for strength inside yourselves. There are those who crumple from a passing breeze; others who are steady through the harshest storm. May you always know, at time of need, that there is more inside you than you think.

May you learn to be loyal, to each other, to your family, your friends. And may you keep the flame of faith alive. There have been Jews in this world for nearly four thousand years. What happens

to us in the next century... it is in your hands, and your heart.
To shape the Judaism of tomorrow.

And may you have the ability to see the big picture. To know that what you think of as your world is not the whole world, that your group, your circle, your focus of concern is not all there is to see. That the barbs that hurt so much are petty, the complaints around you often so small in light of a larger perspective.

May you learn to share, to give as well as to enjoy. To love with a whole heart. And to laugh. To keep a sense of humor. For life is, so often, a pretty funny thing.

You have made me profoundly happy. At times you have made me profoundly tired. But happy or sad, tired or alert, proud or momentarily disappointed, always, always, always, I love you with all my heart.

There is so much more that I want to say to you. But it is enough to start. After all, please God, it's only a first draft.

Hallmark claims that there is a perfect sentiment for every occasion. Well, maybe that's true. Around the time my brother-in-law the philosopher published his first book, Julie's mother saw a cartoon in *The New Yorker*. She sent it to him. It was a picture of a gravestone. Inscribed on the stone were the simple words: "Published... but perished anyway."

"B'rosh hashanah y'kateivun; u'v'yom tzom kippur yeichateimun;

On Rosh Hashanah it is written. On Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many shall pass on, how many shall come to be; who shall live and who shall die; who shall see ripe age, and who shall not..." This day, this time, and this year, we come face to face with the fleeting nature of our lives. A terrifying reminder of mortality.

The words are meant to make us think. About our lives, and our loves. About what we want to live on... even after us.

This year, may the moment meet its purpose. May God not be the only Writer. May our deeds and desires be one. And be known. And shared with those we love.

This year, may we discover the Torah of our own teaching, the scroll of our own souls. Then, indeed, we will truly publish, and, in our legacy of life, will perish not.

L'shanah Tovah.