

**A Minute to Midnight:
Leaving a Legacy of Life
Kol Nidrei 5783; October 4, 2022**

Images from the pandemic: family members separated by glass, unable to hold hands, to touch and say goodbye. Loved ones who could not travel, unable to be with each other in joy and loss alike. Images from Ian...

So much can change in the blink of an eye. In the world, and in our lives. In 2001, I stood before a new congregation, still reeling from a national wound fresh and raw. But that year, there was a personal blow as well. In the days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, my mother suffered a massive stroke. Our move to Maryland was forever different from what we hoped and dreamed and thought it would be.

And this, from that same September. Frantic calls from the planes on 9/11. It starts out as an ordinary day. Off you go, a routine trip, “see you for supper tomorrow, honey,” Then, suddenly, you’ve got seconds left.

Now, still, Uvalde and Buffalo, and Pittsburgh and Orlando and San Diego... even Canada. Too many places to name! Send your kid off, to a concert, a mall... a *school*... and never see them again.

Imagine for a moment, that it is a minute to midnight, in the story of our lives. What would you do? What would you say?

We step back again, for a bit of perspective. It is clear that fear overstates the odds; most places are mostly safe, most of the time. Even so, it is enough to open our eyes, and realize something of the fragility of life.

On Yom Kippur, we go without that which is normal and routine. We set aside the ordinary, the everyday; we separate ourselves from nourishment, adornment, comfort, hygiene, intimacy. It is meant to make us think about morality. But it also moves us to confront mortality.

I want to speak with you tonight about who we are, and what we leave. The tragedy of wanting to convey something, but not having the chance to do it. Or the power of finding a way to say it today, because we never know what tomorrow will bring.

We spend time planning what to do with our “stuff.” And still there are family fights over precious possessions, conflicts over keepsakes, smoldering resentment over heirlooms snatched up by one side or the other. Rules of inheritance appear in law and lore. Judging from its prevalence as a folk motif, anxiety about “who gets what” must be one of the primal forces of the human psyche.

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

But there is more to the challenge of mortality than physical possessions. And there is more to challenge of facing death than what happens to our bodies. We have another gift we can give. It is a spiritual inheritance, not a physical one; not giving away goods but sharing what we think *is* good. It is a wisdom tradition, stories of how to be, ways to pass on lessons learned in life.

This is a tradition which transcends the limits of our living days, which lets voices speak from beyond the grave.

But if you want your voice heard, best not leave it up to your kids to get in touch with you. If you want those close to you to know what's in your heart, better not put it off until some right moment or more convenient time. 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 as one of the most significant acts in their lives, we 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. Perhaps we should leave *Ethical Wills* as well.

When we share our values with others, we learn about ourselves.

There can be surprises. Sometimes children are shocked to learn of the things that are important to their parents. And when these documents are shared when parents are still alive, *parents* are often astonished that their children didn't know how strongly they felt about these things.

Rabbi Jack Reimer writes that: "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." Most of all, in my words, ethical wills are about commitments we keep: 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 Torah, they said, we will be teachers and exemplars; tellers of tales and bearers of life. Revelation contains obligation: we are called to pass on this legacy to the generations to come.

We have come a long way since Sinai. But the journey is not over. With Tolkien “the road goes ever on and on,” farther than any eye can see, unfolding still. And we: we stand in the middle, steadfast keepers of the pledges of the past, makers and shapers of the promise of the future. **On our shoulders falls a double duty: to react to the voices that call our names in the night. And to act as the authors of our own visions, of what is yet to be.**

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

Look, here, not at me, but behind me, beyond me. The windows, the ark, the setting behind me were literally and laterally moved; they were transported. What you see is a portal, a time machine peering back into the early roots of this community. In coming here now, even those of us newly present take on a promise from the past, to remember those who went before, to tell their story still.

A world away, in Latvia, in the 19th century, Rabbi Moshe Yehoshua Zelig 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 which 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 testify 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 Shulamit Rabinovitch, writing 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!.... 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 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.

One woman wrote, very 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."

Look, there are limits. You can ask, you can try, you can micromanage too much. One renowned 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. Putting it off because you don't want to think about what it means? Fine. So, think of it as a first draft. Revise it later.

As it happens, by complete coincidence, without knowing this when I wrote these words, I see that the Jewish Federation of Atlantic and Cape May Counties taking on this very topic. A free, two-part series on Writing an Ethical Will takes place on Thursday evenings, October 20 and November 17, on Zoom. We will follow up with more information in the days to come.

Remember: young or old, it does not matter. As we are reminded in the starkest terms, we never know what tomorrow will bring. Who by fire, and who by water. Who by chance, who by being in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Some of the words we heard already were written by those in their twenties. All of us have something to say. Too often it is only during a meeting to plan a funeral, to gather information for a eulogy, that children even learn how their parents met. Much less what they cared about the most.

The pen has passed into our hands. It may be a keyboard, or camcorder or an iPhone, 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?**

A sample. A start. A rough first draft:

I am so very proud of the people my children have become, the way they have grown. And, to be honest, how Julie has raised them.

To our 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. I think, for a moment, of other nights – times when we finally got you to go to sleep, reading and singing, with a prayer on our lips and in our heart.

Sweet dreams, we say, and may they ever be so, even as you grow. May your spirits soar, your hopes and goals break bounds others would put upon you. May you fly free, defy external expectations, the limits of class, or gender, or race. Talia: may a whole world be open to you, closed to women a short time ago. May you be who are and what you want to be.

You are grown, but may you keep something of your youth with you. May smiles come quickly, wonder, and awe, the joy in discovery that lit up your faces when you were young. May you never squelch the delight, the inner child we remember so well. 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. Some things may seem impossible to bear. Sometimes I don't know how people go on. But they do.

When you were all very young something terrible happened, which you did not understand, but which affected you, which changed forever the world in which you grew. And the world can seem... utterly insane, even now.

After that September morning I will never assume I know what is around the corner. And yet, no matter what may come, may you ever find 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: there is more inside you than you think.

May you 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 forty years... it is in your hands, and your heart. To shape the Judaism of tomorrow.

I have seen you ask questions deep and hard and from the heart. Be engaged, honest, guard your integrity and maintain a sense of standards and high expectations. But remember that no one is perfect. Be involved with those around you – but also lift your eyes for a larger view. For your circle is not the whole world, your group, your focus of concern is not all there is to see.

Even as you fight for what is fair and right and just and good, please remember to laugh. To keep a sense of humor. For life is often absurd or ridiculous or just a funny thing.

May you find partners and people who love you for who you are, and who bring out the best in you.

You have made me profoundly happy. Over the years, 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 more that I want to say. But it is enough to start. After all, please God, it's only a draft.

Hallmark claims that there is a sentiment for every season. 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 forced but still forceful 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.

May our hopes ascend, our dreams come true, our values live on. May we find ways to reach *lador vador*, across the generations. May we convey to those we care for what we care about the most. May we, indeed, publish, and, in our legacy of life, perish not.

L'shanah Tovah.