

**A Minute to Midnight: Leaving a Legacy of Life**  
**Kol Nidrei 5779; September 18, 2018**  
(revised and updated from previous 2001 version)

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

Here, now, too, with another family... Our High Holy Day Cantor, Martin Levson, with us just a few days ago, lifted our spirits and brought a wonderful energy with him. And then, days after Rosh HaShanah, he brought his wife in as a precaution, to check something out. They ended that day with an unexpected flight, med-evaced to Florida. It took creativity, flexibility and generosity to bring Cantor Friedman to our community for Yom Kippur. We are deeply grateful, both to her and to our Reform movement. She has been wonderful to work with; her presence would be a simple and uncomplicated blessing, under any other circumstances. This night, though, a mixed moment: gratitude mingled with concern. And we are all left to wonder... how quickly life can change.

I remember, a year ago, the last phone call to family, before Irma hit. Then, as the agonizing reality unfolded, hours turned into days, I wondered in morbid speculation what it would be.. if that had been the last chance we ever had to speak with them. Like those last second 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 night, honey” and then, suddenly, you’ve got seconds left.

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?

On Yom Kippur, we go without that which is a normal part of life. For this day we are to set aside the ordinary, separate ourselves... from nourishment, adornment, comfort, hygiene, intimacy. It is meant to make us think about morality. But it also motivates us... to confront mortality.

**Tonight I am going to speak about who we are, and what we leave. The tragic sense of wanting to convey something, but not having the chance to do it. Of finding a way to say what we want to say today, because we never know what tomorrow will bring.**

Some people spend a lot of time planning what to do with our “stuff” when their days on earth are done. Too many 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. 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 our things. And: we spend time thinking about our bodies. Living Wills 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 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, one 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. But in thinking about our lives, we should leave *Ethical Wills* as well.**

Some of us have documents in which parents put down on paper the ideals which meant the most to them, core values they would like their children to cherish. What many don't know is that, in doing this, their parents echo an ancient Jewish custom.

**When we share our values with others, we learn things about ourselves.** Sometimes there are surprises! Often children are... shocked to learn some 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: react to the voices that call our names in the night. And 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, now, not up but down, at the sand on the floor. Our Sanctuary itself contains a promise. The Sephardic founders of this congregation in the late

18<sup>th</sup>-century recalled their ancestors, who met in secret. In coming together here, in freedom, we take on a promise, to remember them, to tell their story still.

A world away, in Latvia, in the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 indominatable 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! 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 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. From the other side as well as on this one, 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. To use a phrase back in the news again: just do it. Punting or putting it off because you don’t want to think about what it means? Fine. So it’s a first draft. Revise it later. But remember: young or old, it does not matter. As we are reminded in our prayers this season, we never know what tomorrow will bring. Who by fire, and who by water. Who by chance, and 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 even an iPhone 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?**

I am so very proud of the people my children have become, the way they have grown. 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. 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 vision clear, your hopes and goals break bounds others would put upon you. May you fly free, past the stranglehold of external expectations, the limits of class, or gender, or race. Talia, my daughter: 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 squeal of 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 in your lives. Some things may seem impossible to bear. A friend who lost his seven-year old, drowned at camp. A beloved high school principal who suddenly passed away literally on the day one of you left for college. Peers in a car crash that should never have happened.

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.

And so I say: 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: 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, be honest, guard your integrity. But remember that no one is perfect. Be involved with those around you – but may you also always be able to see a big picture. Remember that what seems to be your world is not the whole world, that your group, your circle, your focus of concern is not all there is to see. That barbs which hurt so much are often, ultimately, simply petty; that the complaints around us often shrink in light of a larger perspective.

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

I have seen you learn to give and to share as well as to enjoy. May you find partners and people who love you for who you are, and 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 so much 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 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 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 each other *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.*