

CHOOSE LIFE: A Sermon for Yom Kippur -5779

In April, I flew out to Cleveland for a different kind of trip home. My brother picked me up at the Airport and alongside my mother, we drove to Ann Arbor, Michigan to spend a day with my mother's best friend Ilona.

I have known Ilona all of my life and she has truly been a second mother to me. Ilona's daughter Nikki is my older brother Jon's age and the three of us grew up together.

When my parents would go on long vacations, we would stay with Ilona. Jon, Nikki and I would play Atari in Ilona's basement and we would make movies in Ilona's backyard which I remember as this vast forest with a massive castle-fortress in the center — but which I realize now was just a small patch of grass with a small wood playhouse, barely larger than a big wheel.

Here Nicki, Jon and I are as little kids — dressing up in all kinds of different outfits — I have no clue what my brother is supposed to be, by the way in that first photo.

SLIDE TWO (hold for a few seconds)

SLIDE THREE (leave it up)

My mother's friendship with Ilona has truly withstood the test of time. When Ilona and her husband separated in the 1980s, my mom was there. When Ilona moved to New Mexico in the 1990s, my mom constantly traveled out west to visit her and spend time with her. When Ilona moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan where her daughter Nikki and her three grandchildren live, my mom went out to visit her time and time again. Through all of these travels, Ilona has also traveled to

see us for life events and has just simply always been there for us time and again....

Here is my mother and Ilona together on one of their many trips to the Chautauqua institute.

SLIDE FOUR

With all of this said, you can imagine how much pain it caused us to learn in March that our dear Ilona was diagnosed with terminal stage four endometrial uterine Cancer. My April trip to Ann Arbor with my brother and my mother was a trip to visit Ilona perhaps for the last time. We wanted to make sure we were able to say goodbye to this important person in our lives.

Now when it came to treatment, Ilona was given a number of options — all including radiation and chemo. But after going through the pain and nearly dying from her first radiation treatment, Ilona made a choice. She brought Nikki in to her hospital room and she explained how she simply did not want to live like that, even if the treatment could prolong her life by some number of days or months. And so, Ilona decided to forgo treatment and to let nature and her body dictate what happens next.

She made a choice.

SLIDE FIVE

There is a moment in the biblical narrative near the very end of the Torah, when the Israelites are on the cusp of entering Israel and Moses is giving his final speech. After so many years of traveling, the long and arduous journey is about to reach its conclusion.

We read from this portion this morning...

In it, Moses tells the Israelites, “Atem N’tzaveem HaYom Culchem” All of You Stand Here Today. He continues by speaking for God, “I have set before you on this day, life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.”

What does this mean? What does it mean to choose life?

Clearly, by choosing not to go forward with treatment, Ilona was in a sense choosing to die. But was she rejecting this commandment? Does the biblical imperative to choose life mean that we should be striving to live one more day by any means?

Put another way, does choosing life mean putting off death as long as we can? If you think the answer is easy, you’re not thinking hard enough, because answering this question requires us to come to a conclusion about HOW God wants us to live, which informs the question HOW LONG does God want us to live?

Now to be clear, many if not most of us here in our congregation and across America and around the world are doing things that are meant to extend our lives by days or months or years. The health and fitness movement is not only a real movement but it is a surging and popular commercial industry.

We are exercising, and taking vitamins, and doing yoga and going to fitness boot camp, using strange Made-for-TV devices, and eating healthy—all, at least in part, as a means of living longer— and it is certainly true that many people in our society, and many of you here today, are looking and feeling really terrific and healthy. I mean it. I know so many of you who are living healthy lives and truly doing everything you can to delay a date with the Grim Reaper.

Now we Jews don't really believe in the Grim Reaper, but the image of us trying to avoid a shrouded dark figure with skeleton hands who is chasing us is (a) kind of funny but (b) also captures a bit what we tend to think when we think of the end of our lives—that, at the end, we are all just trying to escape death by one more day.

My grandfather Manny, at age 92, used to jog little tiny laps in his basement around his pool table to stay fit, and there was a real sense that he was running away from something, the Grim Reaper trying to catch up with him and failing to catch him round and round that little pool table, to hang on to life as long as possible.

We can all agree that it is a good thing to live healthier lives. My mom and dad, who are here with us today, have both been exercising and watching what they eat as long as my brother and I can remember – indeed, any meal at a restaurant with my parents begins with a kind of George Gershwin duet between my parents going over the menu and assessing how healthy or unhealthy the various choices are.

“Should I have the salmon”. “Yes, have the salmon”
“Do you think it is healthy” “Just don't have the butter”
“The Salmon, no butter”. “No butter, the salmon.”
And then together, they look at the waiter and say;
“Please leave the butter off...”

Living healthy is good. Lots of people can teach us even more about what it really means to live healthy, But living healthy is different than simply wanting to extend our lives to the last moment possible, and living healthy doesn't answer the question about whether God wants us to extend our days at all costs.

Indeed -- and this may seem obvious but when you unpack it then your head can spin – I think that living as long as possible is NOT the intention of the biblical instruction to choose life.

The command, “Choose life” does not simply mean “Avoid death as long as you possibly can, no matter what”.

SLIDE SIX

We are together on this morning of Yom Kippur once again — here we are, listening to deep and moving music, staring inward at our souls and coming to terms with all that we did wrong over the course of the past year.

Let’s imagine ourselves at this moment like those Israelites who stood together at the foot of a mountain...

Right now, as this day reaches its midway point, let’s imagine ourselves standing together — being asked and pleaded with and ultimately commanded, to do what?...

To choose life...

[Pause]

On this day, we chant the words of the Unataneh Tokef—this 16th century prayer which states out loud—that, in the next year, some of us will live and some of us will die. The prayer then lists these horrific means of perishing — fire, drowning, burning alive. The prayer compares us to a herd of sheep marching in front of a shepherd who is making the decisions about who will go forward and who will not.....

Yom Kippur is a day in which we say quite clearly that we are vulnerable, we are fragile, we are momentary, we are anything but in control of our destinies....

The prayer reminds us, too, that we could go in an instant, that life is short. We all know this, of course, that the end of our lives could come at any time, but we train ourselves to push this thought out of our minds and many of us choose, instead, to think of life as endless because it is simply too scary to be reminded that one day we will not be alive.

How does this square with the biblical imperative to choose life?

How are we supposed to “choose life” if most of us have no idea, and will have no choice to make at all, about how or when we will die? How are we supposed to “choose life” if we are meant to be reminded, as on Yom Kippur, that our lives are fleeting and temporary?

Only some of us will have the choice that my friend Ilona had, to choose consciously how to live her final days and weeks and months, and in a way that means her life will be shorter.

When I spoke to Ilona on that trip to Ann Arbor, just the two of us on her porch in the Michigan spring time, I sensed that she felt close to God, that despite her choice to live fewer days than she might have otherwise had with treatment, she was choosing life for those days left in a way that was true to her. She was choosing how to live her days. She was looking down where her feet are.

This made me think that there are many examples of people choosing HOW to live their lives that are clearly in line with how God wants us to live, even if that choice might imperil the LENGTH of their life.

Soldiers are a perfect example, like the soldiers that defend our country here in America, and the soldiers that defend the State of Israel. We can argue about when and how the military should be used, but most if not all of us would agree that the State of Israel needs protection by people willing to lay down their lives for its safety, and that there is something holy in this willingness to sacrifice, something good.

SLIDE SEVEN

A very palpable example of this idea is the story we all heard recently celebrating the life of Senator John McCain. McCain, while he was a prisoner of war in Vietnam, was offered by his captors the chance to be released early before his fellow prisoners, because of McCain's famous name and his famous military family. John McCain could have ENSURED a longer life by taking that offer and returning home early.

Instead, McCain refused to be released before his fellow prisoners, choosing instead to endure years more of torture and quite possibly an early death at the hands of his captors. He knew that this choice made him more likely to die, and sooner. And yet we can all agree, can't we, that John McCain chose life in that moment, right? He chose HOW to live, in a way that was true to his beliefs and ideals, even if it possibly meant a shorter life.

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Of course the answer cannot be that a shorter life is a better life? Certainly not. Life is precious, and we are meant to treat it that way. But there is something to learn from my friend Ilona and from John McCain and the choices they made about how to live, even at the sake of hastening when they might leave life.

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SLIDE EIGHT

While life is precious and meant to be cherished, it is HOW we live that is most important to God, and not HOW LONG.

And when we realize this, it helps us to focus on perhaps the thing that is most important of all, and that is NOW.

Now...This moment...Right here...We spend most of our lives living yesterday or living tomorrow. Choosing life means living in the moment — not rejecting the past nor the future — but recognizing that they both serve the present...

Mindfulness is a trend that is sweeping the nation and the world. Mindfulness is the idea that we should become ever more aware—with all of our senses—we should become ever more aware of this moment, and then upon orienting ourselves—we should live in the moment.

Truth is, we Jews have long understood this — the entire purpose of Jewish ritual is to focus our perspective on the sanctity of time — and specifically, on the holiness of this moment...

Mindfulness is what Judaism is all about. It is what prayer is about, what these holy days are about — orienting ourselves to now...

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In deciding that she did not want to go forward with treatment that would have made her sick and miserable even if it extended her life, Ilona has spent these past few months mindfully talking and sharing time with her daughter, with all of her friends who have come to visit and of course with her three grandchildren.

Let me introduce you to them:

SLIDE NINE

Meet Rebecca, Jonah and Elijah. (show photos)

Rebecca is nine years old, Jonah is 13 and Elijah is 15. These three kids are unbelievable. Their mother Nikki is a single-mother who has raised them with wonderful values and a real sense of dedication to both Judaism and to family. Ilona adores them and is in the process of writing them a long letter to be read after she passes away, about her values and what she believes in, and about living a good life. She has thoughts and ideas that she wants them to grow up knowing.

When I went to visit Ilona in April, it was this real celebration of the now — spending time, real time, with people that we love and seeing their faces and observing their laughter.

We can all be sure that Rebecca, Jonah and Elijah will remember this time with their grandmother for the rest of their lives, and remember it fondly and with great meaning. And they will remember the lesson even more profoundly because Ilona taught them how to live in the now, with incredible dignity.

In 1896, an opera appeared that was quite different from most any other opera of its time. It was written by an Italian composer named Giacomo Puccini and it was called La Boheme. It tells the story of impoverished artists who are living in the Latin quarter of Paris in the 1840s. They are bohemians — people who have chosen to live their lives differently than the rest of society. The opera is tragic — without any money, the young artists struggle and at the end, one of the main

characters even dies — but, there is this strong sense that this is a group of people dedicated to living meaningful lives and focused on living in the moment—

This is the appeal of the Bohemian lifestyle — to live in the present and to appreciate the beauty that is too often ignored by others...to be mindful...

It was a Jew from Westchester, NY named Jonathan Larson who brought La Boheme into the modern age.

In 1995, Rent premiered for audiences and was an instant hit. It told the story of a group of young people living in New York and struggling to make it. Over the course of the musical, these young people come to understand the vital need to live for now — no day but today —

Importantly, it is through facing death and illness and loss, it is through their acceptance of what they cannot control, that these characters recognize that how we live matters more than how long.

SLIDE TEN

So too with us, this day beckons us to understand better that death and tragedy and loss are part of life, today, we consider the short time we have on Earth, we consider our smallness, all in order to push us, to inspire us...

To do what?

To choose life...just like Ilona, who in the face of illness, chose to focus on her time with her family and friends and on everything that matters...

Choosing life means we give up our constant regrets about the past and put away our anxious worries about the future ...we accept that much is beyond us...

But choosing life also means that in place of trying to control,, we really live...now, today.

Take a moment — look around you — there are people right here at this moment who love you and who you love back.

You have been a given a day to spend with them.

Don't worry about break the fast or going back to work or school or last week...the coming week...focus on the now—

Spend your life cherishing the moment — choose life.

(PAUSE) That is what Ilona—who just celebrated her 70th birthday last week with her grandchildren—that is what Ilona does...

SLIDE ELEVEN