

Kol Nidre
2018/5779
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Some of you may have known the late Rabbi Murray Rothman. He was the senior rabbi, and later emeritus at Temple Shalom in Newton. He cut a Moses-like figure, with his bushy white beard and imposing presence. He was a rabbi's rabbi, a great orator and a skilled and witty raconteur.

He told the following story. One afternoon, as he was walking to his office, he encountered a young boy, maybe seven or eight who had just been dropped off for Religious School. The boy was surprised to see the rabbi, it wasn't Shabbat, he wasn't on the pulpit and so the little boy asked him, "Rabbi, what are you doing here?"

Rabbi Rothman responded, "I do more than just lead services. Sometimes I have meetings."

The boy, asked, "Do you have a meeting today?"

"Well, no," said the rabbi.

"Then why are you here?"

"Sometimes I talk to people who are having a problem they'd like to discuss."

"Are you meeting with someone?" asked the boy.

"Well, no," admitted the rabbi.

The boy not intending to be impudent or disrespectful, persisted.

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I sometimes have funeral or weddings."

And again, "Do you have a wedding or funeral today?"

"Well no."

And with that, the bell rang. The boy went off to his class and the rabbi continued on his way to his office. He sat down for a moment, and realized he

actually had nothing pressing on his calendar, and thought to himself, “What am I doing here.” So he put on his coat and went home.

He walked in the front door, his wife looked up, “Murray,” she asked, “What are you doing here?”

Tonight on this holiest night of the year, I would like to humbly and respectfully pose that same question to you.

“What are you doing here?”

I can guess that some of you are here out of a sense of filial piety. This is what your grandparents did. Your parents in turn took you to Kol Nidre services when you were young, and you feel a sense of obligation to honor your parents and grandparents by your presence.

Some of us, though our theology may be a bit squishy, (I think many of us would fall in that category!), still want to make sure that we cover our bases. Kol Nidre is serious business. We may claim to be rationalists, uncertain about the existence of an actual *sepher chayim*...a Book of Life, but we have to admit that there are no guarantees in life; therefore, we had better not take any chances. Besides, we have all committed a few sins over the year, and there is something emotionally liberating about asking for absolution, and having the confidence to know that we will be forgiven.

Those are the spiritual reasons for our presence.

Then there are the practical motivations, the useful lessons we may learn about ourselves in the course of the next twenty-five hours that may help us lead happier, more fulfilling lives. It may be something from the prayer book, maybe a thought or two from a sermon, and maybe just from thinking deeply.

I would like to share with you three lessons that I gleaned from the lives of three people, two of whom have died, and one who is very much alive. There is insight and wisdom to be learned from them, and isn't that why we are here tonight?

The first is from the late Senator John McCain. Although faced with a dire prognosis, he spent this last year, unencumbered by the demands of his party, liberated from the expectations of his political bedfellows. He followed his heart, unintimidated and undaunted.

In his autobiography, *Faith of my Fathers*, McCain wrote of his five-and-a-half-year imprisonment in Hanoi, Viet Nam, “In prison, I fell in love with my country. It wasn’t until I had lost America for a time, that I realized how much I loved her.”

There is a lesson to be learned from Senator McCain. In order to appreciate what we have, sometimes we need to step away from our lives.

On Yom Kippur our predictable routine is disrupted; no work, no school, no food, so that we can, without the distractions of daily life, examine what we have, looking from the outside in, in order to gain an appreciation for the blessings that have found their way into our lives. Yom Kippur is not a time to pursue, but to reflect, step back and maybe even, to fall in love once again, with the work that gives our lives purpose, and the people who bring us joy.

Lesson two, another reason we are here comes from an unlikely source, the Attorney General of Pennsylvania, Josh Shapiro. Just last month he released a bombshell report identifying more than 1000 children who were abused over a series of decades by Catholic Priests. I have to admit, when I read the report, my Jewish paranoia led me to wish his name was Murphy or O’Conner, rather than Shapiro!

In an interview in the New York Times, Attorney Shapiro spoke about how his upbringing shaped him. His father was a pediatrician who often testified for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in child abuse cases. He learned from his father that the protection of children is the highest calling.

Shapiro was asked if in the process of his investigation and the release of the report he ever experienced anti-Semitism. He responded, “I’ve experienced [it]. There were a number of statements, e-mails. I don’t read a lot of social media. I frankly don’t pay any of that much mind.”

And then he continued, “My faith and my family are central to my life and ground me. We celebrate Shabbat each week together as a family.” He then quoted a statement from the Mishnah, a compendium of Jewish law “I am in public service because [my tradition] teaches that no one is required to complete the task, but neither are we free to refrain from it. Everyone has the responsibility to get off the sideline, get in the game and do their part.”

The message of these sacred days is that we have power. There is nothing mightier than the human spirit. We don’t have to change the universe all at once, but

neither can we shrink from the responsibility that each of us has, to in our own modest way, work to bring healing into our broken world.

Whether an hour or two a week at a soup kitchen, or supporting a candidate whose views reflect ours, or some time in a classroom, helping a child struggling to learn to read. We don't have to complete the task, but neither are we free to refrain from it.

Finally, a lesson I learned from the life of the late Neil Simon, one of the most prolific playwrights, screenwriters and authors of our day, who died last month. As successful as he was, he did have his critics, among them one who complained that his theatrical productions were sometimes *too funny*, just a series of one-liners strung together.

Humor was Simon's trademark, but what many people don't realize is that he had a very *unfunny* miserable childhood. His father and mother had a tempestuous relationship. His father was remote and distant, and would often leave the family for extended periods. When he returned, there was yelling and doors slamming. Neil Simon's early days were filled with anxiety, trauma and unhappiness.

He once told a reporter that the reason he became a writer was, "to fulfill his need to be independent of such emotional family issues." He said, "I'd better start taking care of myself somehow...it made me strong as an independent person. I think part of what made me a comedy writer is the blocking out of some of the really ugly, painful things in my childhood and covering it up with a humorous attitude...doing something to laugh until I was able to forget what was hurting."

Life is serious business. Few of us will not face the pain of loss, failed love, friends who disappoint us. But if Judaism has anything to say about life, it is that we are forbidden to despair.

In the *shetetyls* of Eastern Europe, it was understood that if in the unlikely occurrence a wedding processional encountered a funeral cortege on the road, the wedding processional always went first. According to Rabbi Jonathan Saxe, "Life is not risk-free...but we can survive the failures and defeats if we never lose the capacity for joy." As the late Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "The purpose of life is to smile, laugh as much as you breathe, and love as long as you live."

They say Yom Kippur is somber and sad, a time for denial and affliction not for frivolity or merriment ...and yet there is something magical about this day; something liberating, optimistic and redemptive.

And that is why we are here tonight.

From the life of an American hero, John McCain, we learn that sometimes we need to step out of our routines to gain perspective, appreciation for the many blessings we sometimes take for granted, or ignore because they are so close.

From a Jewish Philadelphia Lawyer we are reminded that we don't have to change the world, but neither can we hide from our responsibilities as human beings to do what we can to make our neighborhood a gentler, kinder more compassionate and just place.

And from a New York playwright we are taught that life does not come with guarantees, we will have our share of sorrows and travails, but if we are wise those disappointments will become the corner stone around which we construct a life of happiness and joy.

We are here because we know Yom Kippur gives us another chance to get it right: to be honest, never afraid of the truth, to find the words to convey our love for our partners, say the things that express our unconditional love for our children; affirm the joy we feel in having deep friendships, the pride we experience in having meaningful work.

As these next hours unfold, my hope is that our prayers restore our weary spirits. That we can find within our hearts, this New Year, the will to live with dignity, mindful of the many blessings that have found their way into our lives. And may words of love and gratitude flow from our lips as we open our eyes to a world filled with beauty and grace.

Titchadashe alaynu...renew us this day, O 'God, and let us say:
Amen