

**YK 5778: Life Is Precious - Live Well and Leave a Legacy**  
(By Rabbi Michael Schwab – Draft written for speaking)

I don't know about you but over the past few weeks I have been astonished and stunned by the unrelenting chain of hurricanes and earthquakes that have rocked our part of the world. As I watched the storm trackers for Harvey, Irma and Maria, which I found myself doing all of the time, I was worried about my friends and relatives, fellow congregants of Beth El, *your* friends and relatives and the vulnerable populations in each of the affected areas. As each natural disaster hit with these powerfully destructive forces, we witnessed how lives were transformed, sometimes in a matter of minutes or hours. Tragically, dozens killed, thousands flooded, millions without power, whole areas without running water and many forced to move and pick up the pieces of their lives under stressful and difficult circumstances. In addition to feeling sad for those who suffered and becoming determined to assist, these events helped me realize that this is one of the *toughest* facts about the *condition* of human existence – we are not always in control of our

lives and sometimes, often with little warning, life throws difficult, even tragic, circumstances our way.

Our liturgy states, “Who shall live and who shall die?” *Mi Yichiye uMi Yamut - Mi b’kitzo uMi lo b’kitzo* - who in the *fullness* of days, and who *not* in the fullness of days?” These famous, or possibly infamous, words of the seminal High Holiday prayer *Unetaneh Tokef* represent the most stark expression of this unsettling truth of life. Because the answer is --we don’t know. That knowledge is in the realm of God. What *will* this year bring? What *is* in store for me and my loved ones? The fragility of life is laid bare as we realize how quickly things can change from hardship to blessing but also blessing to hardship.

My own family experienced a small taste of this reality just recently. My ninety–six year old grandmother who had the *incredibly* great fortune to live this long with almost no health issues throughout her life, surprisingly and suddenly was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and likely has only a short time to live. One minute she was the woman who we all thought would live forever and the next, the family was

figuring out how to say goodbye. And we all have stories like that. We may be living them right now. Life is fragile and although there are many blessings in life, each and every day, which we *can* count on, life is also clearly full of uncertainties and imperfections.

So what do we do with this heavy truth? *Jewish tradition* expects us to look *that* reality square in the face, and asks us to do so, today. In a popular teaching, the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig wrote, that on Yom Kippur, we actually rehearse death. Think about it: We don't eat. We recite *Vidui*, the confessional, tapping our chests just as we do before we die. We forswear many of other the pleasures and basics of life, in addition to eating: drinking, intimate contact, bathing. We wear a Kittel, a simple white robe, very similar to the burial shroud. And we stand, vulnerable before the throne of judgement, a day of reckoning. Today, through *these* rituals and our liturgy we actively acknowledge our mortality and therefore the ultimate limits we face in shaping the circumstances of our lives.

Why do we do this? And why today? According to Rosenzweig and many others, by confronting this truth head-on, and in this way, we create a certain spiritual focus, the proper *kavana*, the unique mindset we need: to be able to ask ourselves some honest questions that make meaning out of living a life whose future will always, at least partially, remain uncertain. And so we set the scene: were our lives to be over tomorrow, God forbid, what *would* you be most proud of? Of what *would* you be most ashamed? What dreams *have* you fulfilled, and what unfulfilled? What *are* your greatest accomplishments? What are your greatest regrets? And if life *were* to go on beyond this moment, which I pray for all of us it will, in light of these answers, how do you think you should best live the rest of your life?

Everything we do on this holiday: the services, the music, the confessions, the fasting, all of it has a singular purpose: To give us the strength, encouragement, time and context to examine the direction of our lives in a safe nurturing place, grounded in values that reflect infinite holiness. On this day, Rosenzweig teaches, we look at our lives through

the eyes of sacred eternity. And perhaps ironically, it is through these eyes, confronting mortality, that we see the preciousness of our own existence, the unique value of the lives of others, and the importance of our connection to what is beyond us; it is through the lenses of these eyes that we glimpse the very essence of life.

In a powerful personal moment for me, my grandmother shared with me the same truth. I went to visit her in Florida right before the holidays, a short time after the diagnosis, to spend time with her before either the cancer or the morphine took over her personality. During our time together she said to me, “Michael, I am not rushing to die. I didn’t seek it out. But I am not afraid to die. Now that I know that my life is almost over, I can look back and see what was most important and be grateful for the life I had.” What Jewish tradition is saying is that we needn’t wait until the moment that we are actually close to death to gain this perspective, we can also do it while God-willing we still have more time.

In a related teaching, Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the greatest American Rabbis of the last century, counseled that the most important project is not how to *continue* our lives, but how to *exalt* our existence. The cry for a life beyond the grave, he taught, is presumptuous if there is no cry for a great life *prior* to the grave.’ So, as my colleague Rabbi Jeremy Gordon put it, “the first lesson we can learn when confronting the truth of our mortality is that in life, “Let’s aim for great!” Let us raise our sights on what we can do and who we can be. Let’s believe in our potential. We *can* change the world and make a difference in the lives of others! We *can* love and experience love. We *have* the ability to feel true joy and we also *can learn* from what causes us sadness.

What does it mean to aim for greatness? Again Heschel comes to our aid as he wrote: [this is the meaning of existence] “to reconcile liberty with service, the passing with the lasting, to weave the threads of temporality into the fabric of eternity.” Or if that sounds a bit too poetic or overly intellectual, Gordon points out that there was an interview Heschel gave just months before he passed away in 1972 when he

suggested the following: “remember there *is* meaning beyond absurdity. Be sure that every little deed counts, that every little word has power and that we **can**, *everyone*, do our share to redeem the world in spite of all frustrations and disappointments.’ ‘Above all,’ he continued, ‘remember that the *meaning* of life is to build a life **as if, it were, a work of art**. You are not a machine. Start working on this great work of art called your own existence.’”

For each of us, with our different lives, at our different points *in* life, shooting for great might look a little different. Each of our artwork will utilize different colors and materials. There is no one perfect life. Yet our tradition does have some important advice that can guide us, and lay the foundation, for how we can take this project of living purposefully, seriously. You may recall the episode in the story of Esther, when Mordechai attempts to get the newly crowned queen to *protest* the upcoming destruction of the Jewish people to the King. Esther understandably resists out of fear for her life, should the king take offense. Regardless, Mordechai sees beyond these fears and says, “*Mi*

*yodeah im le-et hazot higat l'malchut.*” Who knows, perhaps it was for *this* very moment that you actually became queen?” In every moment in *our* lives, therefore, *we* could ask, “Who knows, perhaps it was for *this* moment that I am here? Perhaps right now is more important than I ever thought! Perhaps who I am and what I can do is exactly what the world needs! Our lives are so precious and therefore each moment counts so much! The brevity and limitations of its existence only enhances life’s beauty and the power of our choices. If we knew we would live *forever* maybe each moment wouldn’t be so important. But here today, in touch with our mortality in a healthy and safe way because of the ingenious rituals of our tradition, we have a chance to pledge our lives, limited as they may be, to the creation of something beautiful, powerful, and meaningful. Something that justifies our existence and as Rabbi Jeremy Gordon wrote, that “allows the flicker of our flame to burn beyond our years.” We have the chance to decide today to live life bigger, to live for a purpose, to make our lives a work of art!



Therefore as you can see sometimes living a purposeful life is simply a matter of perspective. I am reminded of the famous story of the 3 stone masons cutting blocks for the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris in the 13th century. When asked what they were doing, the first replied, "Cutting some stones." The second answered, "Making a living for my family." The third responded, "Helping to create a monument to God." Same action; three different perspectives. We can paint the activities of our life simply in technical terms, like the first mason (or worse in negative terms). Or we can *elevate* the activities of our lives by being aware, and in touch with, the deeper *meaning* and *purpose* of our actions: like helping those we love, providing a quality service to others through our work, or even acting in a way that honors none other than the Creator of us all! The perspective we choose infuses our lives with meaning and can motivate us to live with greater purpose - to *strive* for a work of art.

Other times, though, the purposeful life has to do directly with how we impact the lives *others* in this world. And here the power of giving

*tzedakah* and performing deeds of loving kindness cannot be overemphasized. Think about how precious each dollar is in providing for the needs of the hurricane and earthquake victims who are missing so many basic necessities of life. Or for those who are hungry and in need in our own city, Jew and non-Jew alike. Think about how meaningful it is when people volunteer their time to assist *anyone* in great need – how precious a gift our human and monetary resources can be.

Every Shabbat before we light the candles, each member of our family takes money from our own funds to put in the *pushka*, and when our *tzedakah* boxes are full we decide together where we will give. Each year we also choose family volunteer projects, usually through Beth El or the JUF Tov network, so that we each also give of our *time*. From an early age, we are trying to teach our children that to *be* a Jew is to give. When I meet with relatives after their loved one has died, rarely if ever, do they share how much money their loved one made, or the things they acquired. But if their relative was a giver, they share *this* with me with deep pride and emotion. Giving of oneself transforms

what could be a small narrow life into a life that reaches well beyond oneself: it changes our lives from a simple portrait to a vast painting depicting a gorgeous scene of a lifetime of connecting with others.

And I know that on an emotional level, the purposeful life, the artful life, can be felt most in its impact on one's family and in the legacy we leave behind for those we love. There is a wonderful passage in the Talmud that asks, "What will God ask when we reach *Alom Habah*, the next life? And *one* of the answers given is that God will ask *each* of us: *Asakta B'priya U'reviah*? Did you devote yourself to your family? For the parents here we know that we leave a great deal of ourselves in our children. But not just genetically. This holiday we talk about a Book of Life; a book in which all of our deeds and thoughts are recorded and described. As Rabbi Ed Feinstein wrote, "the Book is not in Heaven. And the Book is not a metaphor. The Book exists in the hearts and minds and memories of our children. They watch us. They know us. They remember: Every act of charity, of kindness, of love. Every moment of cruelty, indifference, of selfishness. They watch, they know, they

remember.” For every lesson we teach, every moment we say I love you and every time we are there to support, we have planted seeds of beauty and strength in our children from which they can grow and build their own purposeful life.

And this ideal is also fulfilled in how we honor our parents, how we love our siblings, how we connect: to our cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews and friends who we value as family. As Feinstein further notes, “The Talmud is shrewd. The Talmud doesn't ask, “Did you *love* your family? Did you *provide* for your children? It asks: *Asakta*, Is family your occupation? Did you *invest* yourself in family? It's a question of setting priorities and of making choices.” Of living life one way, or another. Of choosing the great, the important, over the insignificant. A purposeful life means a life that is in large part dedicated to family.

Another way of understanding living a purposeful life that prioritizes both family *and* giving is by doing as the author of *Unetaneh Tokef* demands, *record* your life in the personal book of life that you

create each year. Rabbi Jeremy Gordon shared that in each chapter of Theodore Zeldin's book, *The Hidden Pleasures of Life*, he engages with a different autobiography from all periods of history. Zeldin wrote that he *loves* autobiographies because he believes they contain *insights* into what other people learned from, and felt about, living life. Without *learning* from others it is hard for us as humans to grow and understand the best way to live. So write it down, he urges, leave a trace and help others, especially your loved ones, learn the lessons of *your* life to help them with the creation of their own. And in *this* sacred way *you* will continue to live too, not necessarily through length of years (though I bless all of you with that) but through the way you have influenced the lives of others.

There is a powerful tradition in Judaism of the *Tzav-a'ah* - the ethical will. We have examples of early ones all the way back to Jacob, Moses, and King Solomon. But one doesn't have to be a famous Jewish leader to write one. An ethical will is a chance to pass on your spiritual heritage, which includes the expression of positive feelings, advice and

the sharing of cherished values. One of the most famous was that of Judah Ibn Tibbon who died in France in 1180 leaving this instruction, amongst others:

My son! I command you to honour your wife to your utmost capacity. Remember her assiduous attendance on you in your illness, though she had been brought up in elegance and luxury. If you would acquire my love, honour her with all your might . . .

Through his ethical will, Judah is using the power of his relationship with his son to try to teach him how to lead a good life and how to value what *he* understands is of prime importance in life, a loved one, in this case a spouse. Most of us are blessed with *material* items to hand off to our inheritors. But what is more important are the unique gifts of self: advice on living life, like Judah gave to his son, and an expression of what the people who accompanied you on the journey of life meant to you. Write it down. Create the book and leave the art only you could have created for your loved ones to appreciate. Living life to the fullest

and passing down a living legacy is a *healthy* way to live beyond our years.

So if I may, here is your homework assignment for after the holiday. I would like you to write a letter to your children, or to a niece, nephew or someone of the generation that will come after you. Tell them what you've learned from your life. Teach them the answers to the questions I asked before: what *are* you proud of, what *were* your regrets, what were your dreams. Do this because, with the pace of life as it is, so few of us take the time to ask these crucial questions, which help us lead more purposeful lives. And also because so many of us forget to articulate these things to our children and relatives. And God forbid, *should* anything happen to us, those who love each of us will know the true us, better, and we will leave a legacy that allows our loved ones to continue to learn from our lives long after we are gone.

*Mi Yihyeh umi yamoot?* Who shall live and who shall die? Who in the fullness of days, and who *not* in the fullness of days? Today, when we look death squarely in the face, we remind ourselves that we may

have no control over hurricanes and earthquakes or even what the next day will bring, but we *always* have control over *how* we live, during whatever time we *are* given and in the face of whatever circumstance we are asked to confront. Immortality is not found in how *many* years one has lived but in whether we see our lives as the creation of a great work of art. A work of art that will continue to inspire and live long after we are gone.

So I leave you with this final story from our Midrash:

When God set out to create the first human being, He consulted with the angels and confided in them His plan to create humans in the Divine image. The angels were outraged. How can something so pure, so precious and so powerful be entrusted to such limited a creature like us – subjected to the trials and tribulations of the world? So they conspired, and stole the Divine Image, and they decided to hide it somewhere humans would never find it. But where?

“Let us put it at the top of the highest mountain!”, one angel suggested. But no, he will one day climb the mountain and find it. “Let us put it at



the bottom of the sea!”), another offered. But no, she will reach it there too. And then the cleverest of the angels stepped forward. “Let us place it where the human will never go to look for it -.Let us place it within his heart, and within her soul.” And so, teaches the midrash, the angels hid the precious Divine Image, the source of meaning, within the heart of humankind where it lies for us to discover to this day.

My prayer, is that today we decide the angels were wrong. That we can, will and often do, discover the Divine Image inside of us. And I further pray that today we are each inspired by that knowledge, to *live* the great purposeful life, the work of art, each of us were surely meant to live. A life that will not only bring meaning to you but through our recorded legacies bring meaning to many generations to come! *Gmar Hatimah Tovah* -- May our book of life for this year be sealed with blessing and may we privileged to write a new one filled with purpose and meaning in the year to come, Amen!