

“Both Hands Open”

Rabbi Marc J. Margolius, West End Synagogue, Erev Yom Kippur 5775/2014

Years ago, Robert Fulghum wrote a best-seller in which he claimed that in kindergarten we learned all we really need to know about life:

Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sandbox at nursery school. These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt someone. Wash your hands before you eat.... And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

True enough. But we all know there's plenty in life for which kindergarten did *not* prepare us. We actually find the deepest wells of wisdom not in early childhood, but in the inevitable, often painful lessons of adulthood.

B'rosh hashanah yikateivun, u'vyom tzom kippur yei-hateimun -- on Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: who shall be born and who shall die. On Rosh Hashanah, our theme is rebirth; we re-imagine the story of our lives. On Yom Kippur, our focus is death. Today, many of us wear a *kittel* or white clothing, symbolizing our burial shrouds. We say *yizkor*, honoring our lost loved ones. With *eileh ezkerah*, we relive the deaths of Jewish martyrs through the ages. As we face our fragility, the vulnerability of all we hold dear, we shudder. Days of awe, indeed.

Death is our most frightening and unacceptable reality. We all hope to leave this world like our ancestor Jacob: in old age, at peace, surrounded by adoring family. But often, death drops in unexpectedly. "We don't know our time," says *Kohelet*, the Book of Ecclesiastes. "As the fishes which are taken in an evil net, and as the birds which are caught in the snare, even so are the children of man snared in an evil time, when it falls suddenly upon them" (Ecc. 9:12).

Years ago, my colleague Rabbi Kenneth Berger delivered a memorable sermon about the space shuttle Challenger disaster. Before they crashed, he noted, the astronauts may have had a few minutes of consciousness when they knew death was imminent. He wondered what might have passed through their minds during those terrible minutes. He asked his congregants: **what would go through your mind if you knew you had five minutes to live?**

In a tragic irony, just a few months later Rabbi Berger and his wife Aviva died in a plane crash. The questions he'd posed hypothetically became real questions in his own life. And the answers he had suggested in his sermon gave his mourners some small degree of comfort.

This is what Rabbi Berger taught: when someone has five minutes to live, there are three possible responses, and each of them begins with words of regret -- "if only."

The first regret: **if only I had known.** If only I had realized when I had said goodbye to my loved ones. If only I could have given them a farewell kiss truly reflecting the depth of my love. Rabbi Berger said that usually, we are deprived of knowing which

kiss, which glance will be the last one. So that we can do is fill each kiss, each look, each word, with as much love as we can muster.

The second regret: **if only I'd realized what I had when I had it.** If only I had appreciated the blessings I took for granted. If only I hadn't squandered so much time. If only I had lived according to my priorities. If only I had truly numbered my days, and gotten myself a heart of wisdom.

The third and final regret: **if only I had another chance, I would do things differently.** If only I had the opportunity, I would have loved more intensely. I would have made time to visit my parents again. I would have come home for dinner instead of working into the night. I would have apologized. I would have forgiven.

"Then you realize," said Rabbi Berger, "it's all the same. Five minutes, five days, five years, fifty years. It is the same, it is all over before we realize...." So, Rabbi Berger taught, we should anticipate our regrets. We must love each other more intensely each moment we are here. We must embrace life with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our might. **We must hold fast to life and our loved ones, moment to moment to moment.**

We know that holding on is surely futile. Despite our wishes, life never stands still. The setting sun will not stay frozen in place to be appreciated indefinitely. Children won't let themselves be held forever. Change, aging, death are coming to us all.

The mythic Garden of Eden contains two forbidden trees: the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge, they discovered that they were mortal. "*Ki afar atah, v'el afar tashuv,*" God says. "You come from the dust, and to dust you shall return." Alone among all species, we human beings are aware of our mortality.

It's tough to even think about death, let alone accept it. We work hard to suppress the unthinkable. Rabbi Berger advised seizing hold of life, living fully in each moment. But focusing only on the here and now can sometimes also be a form of denial -- a way of closing our eyes to the losses which inevitably lay ahead.

How can we love and live life to the fullest, knowing it can vanish so unexpectedly? Once again, **the answer lies in our capacity to hold the truth with both hands – and, to keep both hands open.**

Rabbi Milton Steinberg, a disciple of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, delivered his most famous sermon after he recovered from a near fatal heart attack. In recuperating, Rabbi Steinberg took a walk in the midday sun and was struck by the fact that life and our world are so precious, and yet we are so careless with it. In his sermon, he preached that we must live fully and joyfully with the awareness that nothing in life is ours to possess. We must neither deny our mortality, nor despair over its inevitability.

Rabbi Steinberg understood the strain of living within this paradox. He believed that religion helps us hold this tension with equanimity. “Only with God,” he said, “can we ease the intolerable tension of our existence. For only when [God] is given, can we hold life at once infinitely precious and yet as a thing lightly to be surrendered. Only because of [God] is it possible for us to clasp the world, but with relaxed hands; to embrace it, but with open arms.”

“[I]t is easier to let these things go,” said Steinberg, “because we know that **as parts of the divine economy they will not be lost.** The sunset, the bird’s song, the baby’s smile, the thunder of music, the surge of great poetry, the dreams of the heart, and our own being, precious to each of us. All these we can well trust to God who made them. There is poignancy and regret about giving them up, but no anxiety. When they slip from our hands they will pass to hands better, stronger, and wiser than ours.”

Steinberg surely didn’t mean a traditional conception of God as a supernatural omnipotent Supreme Being. He certainly didn’t mean the conception of God which we learned in kindergarten, a conception many of us have outgrown but never adapted as adults.

For Steinberg and for many of us, God is something very different -- but just as powerful, just as real. We experience God as the animating, ordering Life of this universe, the Force within and around us which impels us to construct order, meaning and purpose in the face of loss and chaos. We can sense that nothing in life is ever lost. **Every wave of life, as it settles back into the ocean from which it first rose, again becomes part of what Steinberg called “the divine economy.” Our spirit returns to its source. No one is ever fully lost.**

While each of us is just passing briefly through this world, something within us recognizes that there’s a holy spark in everything. *Chayei olam nata b’tocheinu* – eternal life has been implanted within each of us. In our moments of heartbreak, each of us can sense that we are inherently part of something greater into which we can lay back and trust we will be held in love.

When we live with open hands, when we love as deeply as possible even while knowing we’ll lose those whom we love, we enter the realm of heartbreak. Tonight and tomorrow, we repeatedly tap our chests. On Yom Kippur we crack open our hearts. This is a day of spiritual CPR. And while heartbreak leads us to sadness and grief, as we keep walking deeper into the cracks, we find it leads us as well to wisdom, even to joy.

This summer I lost a very precious life friend, Miki Young z”l, without whom I would certainly not be who I am today. Miki battled an incurable cancer for six years. Like most patients, she passed through all the appropriate reactions – denial, anger, negotiation, grief, fear. But Miki also contained a deep wisdom which enabled her to hold all of those very human emotions while at the same time witnessing the much bigger picture, and

continuing to find meaning and joy in life. Miki wrote a blog to share her journeys; this is one of my favorite of her teachings:

I think that there's a comfort to mortality. I think some day, when the timing is right, I will simply fall back into a large white parachute, letting go of worry, letting go of fear and just relaxing into the silkiness.

Until that time, **I find it comforting to think that the reason for my mortality is to drive my living.** We are all here for such a short time that it is important to discern what we really want our lives to be about. There is a wonderful Buddhist metaphor. That we are each like the sea turtle swimming underwater for a long period, rising to the surface to take in a big gulp of air and then submerging again. That gulp of air is our lifetime. It is only here that we get to do our work and our good deeds.

To me, **the only reason for our death and the deaths of those we love is to give urgency to how we choose to live.** It offers us, in fact, the ultimate literal deadline.

Forced to face the thought of the ending of my life has raised questions about my existence. Questions about my destiny. What am I meant to do in this life? How can I help others? I struggle for a bit to try and determine what is the best path. And then I stop. This is not about struggling. This is about listening deeply and having the courage and self-compassion to take the very next step.

We have all come into the world to sing our tune, to learn life's lessons and to share with others where we can do the most good. Living reveals who we are with all of the blessings of our human strengths and our human frailties. We learn from both and if we don't learn from our own experiences, maybe at least others will. That is of great comfort.

We are here to sing our tune. We are here to grow the seed of eternity implanted in each of us. For each of us, the journey inevitably leads us through the land of heartbreak. And, as my colleague Cantor Jack Chomsky has written, "if there is something positive in heartbreak, it is the possibility that when our heart breaks, it breaks open -- open to receive, open to understand, open to hear things that it might have been closed to previously." Heartbreak is the critical ingredient in *teshuvah*, in transforming ourselves into who we are meant to be.

Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote a short story for these holidays about Rabbi Bainish of Komarov, a rebbe who suffers the loss of his wife and five children, and consequently rejects God and Judaism. Singer entitled his story "Joy."

On the brink of a spiritual abyss, Rabbi Bainish has a vision of his daughter Rebecca, who shines with "an unearthly light, with the aura of the Days of Awe." In the

vision, Rebecca wishes her father a *gut yontif*. She insists that he eat and bless the source of his food. She insists he begin teaching Torah again.

Rabbi Bainish's faith returns, but transformed by his heartbreak. "Why is the moon hidden from view on Rosh Hashanah?" he asks his students. His answer is enigmatic: "[Because] of all the blessings on man, the greatest lies in the fact that God's face is forever hidden."

One would think playing hide and seek with a God who can never be found would bring anguish, not blessing. In kindergarten, hide and seek was no fun unless we found "it." But we're long past childhood innocence; we harbor the same anguished doubts as Rabbi Bainish. With each brush with loss, with each challenge to our faith, we question whether to continue the search. What's the use?

Paradoxically, it's precisely in these moments of greatest doubt, loss and anguish, that we sense the presence of small degree of light – and we realize that the moon, although hidden, still awaits us, ready to be found.

We don't know exactly what transforms Rabbi Bainish. The ends with the rabbi on his deathbed at the end of the holidays, surrounded by his students and wife:

He heard his wife sob, and wanted to comfort her, but no strength remained in his throat and lips. Suddenly, [his closest disciple leaned over him, as though realizing that the rabbi wished to speak -- and the rabbi murmured, 'One should always be joyous.' Those were his final words.

In kindergarten, joy may have come more easily. Tonight, despite or maybe because of our inevitable losses, we remember not to postpone anything – to wring every drop of goodness, blessing and joy we can, every moment of every day.

Tonight and tomorrow, as we wander together through the land of heartbreak,

May we learn to hold life with open hands.

May our hearts crack open more fully to ourselves, to each other, to God.

May each of us feel less alone in our pain and fear.

May our thoughts become larger than our selves.

May the barriers between us fizzle into falsehood.¹

*May grief and pain give birth to greater wisdom
and compassion for ourselves and each other.*

May each of us attune our broken hearts to the song of our lives.

*May we learn to sing our song each day
with passion and with joy.*

¹ Drawn from a poem by Cantor Ron Fischman z"l in his "My Book of Days."