

**5775 - 4 YOM KIPPUR
Confronting Death and Other Big Changes**

Since becoming a rabbi in 1982, I have officiated at many hundreds of funerals. Each one is unique, since every person's story is different. Some deaths come as true tragedies, others are a blessing for all involved, while some are the anticipated conclusion to a life well lived.

It comes as no surprise that everyone has their moment when they first have to confront the reality of their mortality. For me, it was around twenty years ago, when Ruthie and I made up our first will. We had to come to grips with questions like "what will happen to the kids if something was to happen to both of us?"

Our second close encounter came when we decided to purchase burial plots. I have seen far too many Jewish families scramble in the aftermath of an unexpected death and pay a very high price, literally and figuratively, for not planning ahead.

Though Ruthie and I hope to wait about sixty years before occupying our spots in Beth Am's beautiful cemetery in Blauvelt, it is a good feeling to know that it is all taken care of.

Those experiences, however, were not nearly as uncomfortable as my urologist telling me, some four years ago, that he thought that we should do a prostate biopsy. The truth is that I barely knew what a prostate was. Yes, I had my PSA levels checked every year since I turned 50 and while they were slowly rising, I was told that this was normal.

Then, four years ago, my PSA level more than tripled. The doctor told me not to worry because, even in a worst-case scenario, that is not what would happen. After asking some questions, we determined that the cause was probably all of my inner organs rubbing against each other as part of my marathon training. I stopped running and the PSA levels returned to their normal, slightly-elevated level. We did end up doing the biopsy, however, which came out clean.

This past year, my levels were going up again and my urologist wanted to do another biopsy. While I felt fine, I was nervous in having to go through the procedure a second time. All kinds of questions about the future began to run through my mind.

Fortunately, the biopsy came out clean once again. However, the subject of one's mortality is one which I want to share with you today. Not so much my mortality, but yours.

Yom Kippur is known as Yom Ha-Din, the Day of Judgment. While some of us may take this quite seriously, others view it metaphorically. Yet no matter what our perspective on “The Day of Judgment” may be, Yom Kippur is a day to remember that, unlike God, we are not immortal. Our time on this earth is limited, so what are we going to do with it?

Will we play games on our phones or our computers for hours at a time? Will we focus on activities that don’t make a positive difference? Or will we begin to make positive changes in our lives, in our world?

Each of us knows the specific areas in which we could make those changes. For me, it has been clear for years that I really need to get to bed earlier.

It isn’t that I don’t know all about circadian rhythms, late-night snacking and exhaustion making one more receptive to illness. I do. And yet, the sheer volume of what life has thrown at me has enabled me to easily outlast any college student one could find in terms of late-night hours.

It all started with “Mary Hartmann, Mary Hartmann.” The 1976 late-night soap opera first pushed me past an 11 pm bedtime. Then, it was “The

Tonight Show,” in the days when it was ninety minutes long and hosted by Johnny Carson.

Back then, it was a choice I made. For the past decade or more, however, it wasn't. There just were not enough hours in the day, no matter how organized and efficient I tried to be. I constantly thought of the Beatles “Eight Days A Week.”

What was it? It was Temple; it was trying to manage finances while putting four kids through almost twenty years of college. It was the huge increase in my personal responsibilities as a result of email and the internet age.

Yes, I am likely to have a baseball game or an old TV show on in the background while I am working, but my focus on most nights from midnight till 2 am on a good night or often up to 4 am or later is just getting through everything that needs to get done, even if it is creeping out the neighbors by cleaning the pool at 3 am.

Back in the late 1970's, while in my first year of rabbinical school in Jerusalem, I had to be up early to get to school and I had no problem with it. Of course, I had no TV, I had no job and email and the internet were still unheard of.

However, I do know that I eat less in the morning than late at night. I do know that I am more likely to get out and exercise early in the morning than I will late in the afternoon or at night. I do know that phones ring early, landscapers start their lawnmowers and leaf blowers, school buses squeal on the road. Sleeping late is not easy, even if I had that option.

I love the peace and quiet of the late night, but the truth is that the early morning is almost as quiet and not as eerie. So, last year I told myself, once again, that I would make an honest effort to get to bed earlier in preparation for 2014 and this year, I was especially motivated by some of my medical warnings.

I was looking forward to getting up on this bimah tonight and reporting that I managed to practice what I preached. I wanted to let you know that I made the change which enabled me to eliminate late-night snacking and lose those ten pounds, that I am getting more exercise and my productivity is as good as ever.

We all have changes to make in our lives. Some are fairly easy, but this one was stopped almost before it started. Yes, there were a few nights when I got to bed before midnight, but the reality is that with every passing year, those late nights have gotten later and later. Whereas 4am

used to be a shocking sight, by this past summer, it had become a very familiar companion. Unfortunately, I was sometimes going to bed when others of you were waking up. I know that this is not good. I know that I tried and I know that I failed.

I can make all of the arguments used by everyone else, whether it is about their diet, their lack of exercise or their lack of involvement in Temple.

The bottom line is that Judaism believes in personal responsibility and if one really wants to do something, it is usually possible to find a way; it just may require more effort than one had expected. As Theodor Herzl, the visionary of modern Zionism said more than 125 years ago

אם תרצו אין זו אגדה “If you want it, it need not remain a dream!”

I still dream about learning what all the excitement is about Matt Lauer, instead of listening to reruns of “Burns and Allen,” “Hazel,” “Bachelor Father” and other shows from the 50’s and the 60’s playing in the background.

Change is not easy, neither personal change nor societal change. At every service, we sing the prayer “Oseh Shalom.” We ask God to bring peace to us, to our people and to our world. Of course, we have been asking for almost two thousand years, so we shouldn’t expect all of the changes we seek to come immediately or without a lot of effort.

However, I am going to try again. It may involve some serious changes to my schedule, like eating a 5pm dinner, instead of a 10 or 11 pm dinner. However, when one decides to enjoy the beauty of Shabbat, one has to rearrange tasks that used to be done on Friday night and Saturday. This is no different. If the motivation is strong enough, most of us can do just about anything.

And so, as we review the many problems of our world on Yom Kippur, let us also resolve to address some of our own personal issues openly, honestly and with full effort. Making resolutions is easy; fulfilling them is far more difficult.

We don't have to share what those issues are with others, but we all owe it to ourselves and to those around us to do our best, as opposed to what we have done up to this point.

I wish that staying up late was my greatest shortcoming, but it is one which I will specifically target this next year. May we all come together next year as changed people and maybe then you can tell me what I missed since Jane Pauley stopped hosting the "Today" show . . .

And so, this sermon was supposed to conclude to end when I finished writing it on September 14. In the nearly three weeks since then, motivated by the knowledge that I would be standing here admitting failure before you, I again committed to changing this behavior. While it has been only three weeks, I can report that I have made significant progress.

As my kids were growing up, I told them that the one phrase that was unacceptable was “I can’t do it.” The truth is that if and when we really want or really need to get something done, we usually make sure that it gets done, despite the excuses.

We can make the changes we need to make in ourselves. We can make the changes we need to make in our world. No, it isn’t going to be easy, but yes, it is worth it. May we all be blessed with success in making those changes, in our lives, in the new year. AMEN