

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5777 – What is Your Why?
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One of the enduring and indelible images of the High Holidays is the Book of Life. With tonight's setting sun, we imagine God opening the book, taking out the bookmark, and picking up with the story each of us has written since last year. Since the New Year is a season for remembering stories of weeks and months gone by, and imagining how we wish to continue writing the story in the year ahead, I want begin 5777 with a story. Isaac Bashevis Singer tells this story and it is called "Fool's Paradise."

Once there lived a rich man whose name was Kadish. He had an only son named Atzel, and along with Kadish's wife there lived with them an orphan girl named Aksah. Atzel was a tall boy with black hair and dark, kind eyes. The girl had hair the color of summer wheat and eyes like a clear, mountain lake. The children were the same age. They ate together, studied together, and played together. When they played house, Atzel would play husband and Aksah, wife. Everyone knew that one day they would marry.

When they had grown, Atzel became ill, but it was a malady no one had ever heard of. Atzel imagined that he was dead. How did he contract such a notion? Many believe that it was from listening to stories about Paradise from an old nanny who used to come to take care of him. She described Paradise as a blissful place where there was no need to work, study, or make any effort. In Paradise, one feasted on delicious meats and platters of fruit. The wine flowed freely, reserved especially by the Lord for the upright of heart. Best of all there were no duties or responsibilities. Atzel loved these stories about Paradise for he was quite lazy. He hated getting up early, doing his lessons. He hated the idea that one day he would have to take over his father's business.

The only problem with Paradise, his nanny sighed is that you could not get there until you died. Atzel made up his mind that he would just have to die as quickly as possible. He thought about it so much, that soon he began to imagine he was dead. His parents became quite concerned, and it drove Aksah to silent sobs in the privacy of her bedroom. The family tried desperately to convince him that he was alive, but he simply would not believe them. "Can't you see I am dead," he would say, "Why don't you bury me and then I can get to paradise." Kadish brought in many doctors to examine his son. All came to the same conclusion, he was talking, eating, and sleeping; all signs pointed to the fact that he was alive. But these doctors only made Atzel's strange condition worse, and soon he ate less and less, and stopped speaking.

Finally, Kadish went to seek the advice of a great and wise physician, Dr. Yoetz. After hearing about Atzel's illness, the doctor said, I can cure him in 8 days, but only if you exactly follow my instructions, no matter how strange. The next day, Dr. Yoetz came to the house and examined Atzel. The doctor looked at the pale and thinning young man, and in a loud voice said, "Why do you keep a dead body in the house? Why don't you make a funeral?" When Atzel heard this his face lit up, "You see, I was

right," he said. Atzel was so excited that he got out of bed and danced with joy, which made him hungry, so he asked for food. "You will eat in Paradise," said Dr. Yoetz.

Next, Dr. Yoetz instructed the family to make up a room that looked like paradise. They hung white drapes from the ceiling and the windows were drawn so that no light could enter, and they lit candles. Dr. Yoetz told the servants to dress in white and to wear angels' wings. After the funeral ceremony that Atzel happily slept through, cozy in his coffin, he awoke to find himself in a plush bed in a room he did not recognize. "Where am I?," he asked. A servant, dressed as angel said, "Paradise, my lord." "I am famished," said Atzel. The angel clapped her hands, and just as his nanny had promised, platters of meats and fruit were brought to him, along with God's special wine. After eating his fill, he fell asleep.

When at last he woke, the same oil lamps still burned on the table. Angels brought him the same meal as the night before. "Why do you bring me the same food?" Atzel asked. "And what day is it? Is it morning or evening?" One of the servants replied, "We eat the same thing in Paradise. And in Paradise, there is no day or time." "Well, what should I do now?" Atzel asked. "One does not do anything in Paradise." Then Atzel started to think about his family, and wanted to know when they would join him. "Your father still has 20 years to live and your mother 30. No one who is still living can come here." "And what about Aksah?" "Oh, she will not be here for at least another 50 years." "So I will be here alone? What will Aksah do?" The servant angel responded, "Right now she is mourning you, but life must go on. She is still young, and will likely meet another young man and marry him."

Atzel remained in the false Paradise for 8 days and he grew very sad. He missed his family and Aksah. He was bored. He wanted to study and he wanted to do work. "I see that it is not so bad to be alive," he said to an angel. The angel shook his head, "Living is work, feh!" How long will this Paradise last, Atzel wanted to know. Forever said the angel. Atzel clapped his hand to his forehead, "Oy! I would rather kill myself." "A dead man cannot kill himself," the angel admonished.

When Atzel's despair was deepest, one of the servants came rushing in, "My lord, a mistake has been made, you are not dead, you must leave Paradise." "I am alive?!" "Yes, and I will bring you back to earth." The servant blindfolded him and led him this way and that through the house. When his blindfold was removed, he was overjoyed to see his family, to feel the fresh air, to see the work that needed to be done in the fields and around the house. He embraced Aksah and soon they were married. Atzel became a diligent merchant. Later Atzel learned how Dr. Yoetz cured him, and how he lived in the fool's paradise. He would tell his children and grandchildren about how he was cured always ending with the words, "But, of course, what paradise is like, no one can really tell."

We can laugh at this story because it is ridiculous and funny. Like all stories that matter, its message is also serious, touching our souls. It is one fitting of the High Holy Day season. There is a little bit of Atzel in all of us. Perhaps we become a little bit

lethargic in our intentions and our focus. Perhaps we pine for some kind of unrealistic reward while real life, that is messy and sometimes complicated, but also beautiful and holy, passes us by. So, when our New Year season arrives we adorn ourselves and our Torahs in the color white, the color of purity, the color of the burial shroud. Like Atzel, we will go so far as to rehearse our own deaths on Yom Kippur. And like Atzel, we will revisit and reflect on what it is that we live for. What is our purpose?

What do we live for? This is a big question, and answering is a daunting task. If an outside observer, God, let's say, had to answer this question based on Her observations about the way we live our lives, we might not like the answer. Based on our behavior, it might seem that we live for our jobs or climbing the ladder of success. We live to gratify our desires or to feed our egos. Or perhaps it is for watching sports, playing sports, shopping and accumulating things, or the pursuit wealth or power. Or maybe we live small, shying away from living to our fullest potential, opening ourselves to feeling, risking, or being vulnerable and open to others, to new experiences, and new ideas.

In his book, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, Rabbi Alan Lew, of blessed memory, teaches us that the High Holidays come to strip all pretenses away from our lives. The illusions we build for ourselves and others come tumbling down. It is *Yom Ha-Zikaron*, a time of mindfulness and awakening. Of these holy days he writes, "This is a journey from denial to awareness, from self-deception to judgment...we will move from self-hatred to self-forgiveness, from anger to healing, from hard-heartedness to broken heartedness."¹ What is the essence of our lives? From last New Year to this one our lives are not getting longer. The urgency to make the most of our days grows stronger. The blast of a horn shakes to acknowledge this reality. "Awake you sleepers from your sleep, rouse yourselves you slumbers out of your slumber! Examine your deeds...Remember your Creator, you who are caught up in the daily round, losing sight of the eternal truth; you who are wasting your years in vain pursuits that neither profit or save..." So, we stand here together this night, and we acknowledge the magnitude of it all, what Rabbi Lew calls our condition. And what is our condition? Rabbi Lew answers, "that life is real, very real...And we are utterly unprepared. And we have nothing to offer but each other and our broken hearts." That will be enough, he says.

In some ways he is right, being together and facing this condition together is enough. But it is only a beginning. It is enough if we use our time together and with God to answer Atzel's question. Why do we live? **What is our why?** At a recent TED talk, leadership expert Simon Sinek emphasized "why" as the central question for any organization or business. According to Sinek, most businesses think and communicate from the outside in – they describe what they do and how they do it. Sinek suggests that inspiration comes from starting with the inside out, and in order to do that, one must start with the why. He writes, "...very few people or organizations know why they do what they do. And by "why" I don't mean "to make a profit." That's a result. It's always a result. By "why," I mean: What's your purpose? What's your cause? What's your belief?

¹ *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared* p. 8

Why does your organization exist? Why do you get out of bed in the morning? And why should anyone care?”² What we each do and how we live should then flow from the question why.

Over the High Holidays, our tradition pushes us to answer the question why. Why do we live? For what purpose? How far have we strayed from that purpose? How have our actions undermined the meaning that we seek in our lives? How can we return so that we live with integrity? It is the simplest of questions – “why.” And so very difficult to answer. The Still, Small Voice whispers it to us, “why?” Every moment of every day, but through the din of life, and the distractions, the shortcuts we take, and the despair we all sometimes feel, we cannot hear it. We are unprepared. Rabbi Lew would say, now is the time to keep the din at bay, and to break down the walls, to feel vulnerable, to remind ourselves and our God why we live.

Throughout these Yamim Nora'im, here at Temple Beth David we will consider three core components to finding our why, to reorienting ourselves to purpose. The first is to be present, to say “*hineini*” that we are ready to respond with our fullness of being to those who need us. Second, as Jews there can be no answer to why, to our purpose, without community. We each seek personal meaning, yet Jewish community enables us to be part of something greater than ourselves. When we align the story of our lives with the story of our people and we transcend loneliness and the confines of the self. And third, we rededicate ourselves to the pursuit of truth, for in order to find our “why,” we must be honest with ourselves and others. We will explore these themes more tomorrow morning and throughout Yom Kippur. I know I also speak for Rabbi Karen when I say that we look forward to focusing on these ideas together in the years ahead, and hearing more about your thoughts, your why, your purpose.

Life and death. Right and wrong. Transgression and forgiveness. Straying from the path and return. Despair and hope. These are the choices that face us as the New Year unfurls. It can feel daunting, like being alone in the dark. The Chasidic master, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, taught that when we face the darkness and cannot find the way out, we can look inside for the good. That goodness is like a dot of white light in the night. Once we find one point of light, we search for another until those dots become like a string of musical notes, a melody. That melody, that *niggun*, becomes the beginning of our why, our essence, the compass that gives direction to our existence. May we all find our melody, and this year sing it with all our hearts, that we might be inscribed for another year in the Book of Life.

² Simon Sinek TED Talk “How Great Leaders Inspire Action.”