

High Holy Days 5781/2020  
Kol Kidre Sermon  
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**BIRTH IS A BEGINNING:  
A Meditation on HHD as a Recapitulation of the Life Cycle**

**Meditation before Kaddish on Kol Nidre Night:**

Birth is a beginning  
And death a destination,  
And life is a journey:  
From childhood to maturity  
And youth to age;  
From innocence to awareness  
And ignorance to knowing;  
From foolishness to discretion  
And then, perhaps to wisdom;  
From weakness to strength,  
Or strength to weakness  
And, often, back again;  
From health to sickness  
And back, we pray, to health again;  
From offense to forgiveness,  
From loneliness to love,  
From joy to gratitude,  
From pain to compassion,  
And grief to understanding  
From fear to faith;  
From defeat to defeat to defeat --  
Until, looking backward or ahead,  
We see that victory lies  
Not at some high place along the way,  
But in having made the journey, stage by stage,  
A sacred pilgrimage.  
Birth is a beginning  
And death a destination.  
And life is a journey,  
A sacred pilgrimage  
To life everlasting.

**What is the power of these words?**

**They articulate the boundaries of human life with eloquent simplicity and truth. And now, as we come together at Kol Nidre nearing the end our High Holy Day observance, they come to us as a reminder that these ten days of Awe from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur can serve as a mirror against which we might see the reflection of our lives, and of eternity.**

**It seems to me that the observances of Jewish religious life are eminently wise – a response to the greatest joys and the deepest sorrows of our lives. In the case of birth, bar or bat mitzvah, marriage and especially death, this wisdom is evident. But it is not only the life cycle ceremonies of Judaism that can ease us through life's poignant moments. I believe our holy days and festivals hold this potential as well.**

**What is it in our observance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that enables them to engender a genuine sense of renewal in the transition from one year to the next? In short, what makes them work?**

**I would argue that it is because these ten days are, in themselves, a microcosm of the human life cycle -- a recapitulation of human life itself, just incredibly concentrated. From beginning to end, observance of these ten days evokes the image of the whole of a person's life, even as it responds to the needs of each of life's stages. These ten days are, in a way, a journey through life itself, a sacred pilgrimage whereby we are able to return to past events to redeem them, anticipate the future, and reflect on how we may best live it. Think of these ten days as the span of all your days, and of how Jewish tradition would have you live them.**

#### **FIRST: ROSH HASHANAH – BIRTH IS A BEGINNING**

**According to tradition, Rosh Hashanah is Hayom Harat Olam the day of the world's birth. But it is more than this. There is a teaching that says Adam, the father of us all, was fashioned during the first hour of the first Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of humankind.**

**With that in mind, we can think of our observance of Rosh Hashanah as one grand birthday party. There are sweet treats, round challahs and teiglach to serve as birthday cakes, candles that we light (but hopefully, don't try to blow out), party hats (for the more traditional), and even a very special noisemaker (the shofar) to mark, our celebration. The sound of the shofar is the sound of a newborn world wailing as it inhales life and exhales its first cry. This is the birthday of humankind. And on RH our birth has been blessed. Our Creator is with us.**

**Rosh Hashanah is also a celebration of the birth of the Jewish people. On Day One of Rosh Hashana in traditional congregations, the Torah reading is the story of the birth of Isaac (Genesis 21:1–34). On Day Two, the reading is the story of the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:1–24).**

**The chain of our descent from Abraham is through Isaac, the only son born to Abraham and Sarah. It is no coincidence that the Torah portion read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah in traditional congregations is the story of his birth.**

**As we read this story, it is intended that we experience vicariously our birth as a people. Rosh**

Hashanah is a time for rebirth and renewal as a covenant people the descendants promised to Abraham because of his trust in God.

Even the Haftarah portion traditionally read on the first day of Rosh Hashanah is a celebration of birth. Taken from the first book of Samuel, it describes Hannah's passionate plea for a child, and her song of joy when that prayer is answered. Each new birth, each new experience of rebirth is something miraculous of which we stand in awe. The beginning of our observance of these ten days, it is a celebration of birth and renewal, a time of joy and optimism and hope.

#### AND LIFE IS A JOURNEY

And time passes. In the Torah portion for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, Isaac has now become a young man ready to leave home. The story is the Akedah, the tale of Abraham and Isaac's journey to Mount Moriah where they face the greatest test of their lives. Think of it as a parable about what it is to enter adult life.

Like many of us even now, Isaac sets out without a clear sense of where he is going or why. All that he knows for sure is that there is a journey to be made and a burden he is to bear. While most of our life's journeys may not be as melodramatic as that of Isaac, nonetheless, there are several unanswered questions we share with him:

- where have I been?
- where am I going?
- what is the purpose?
- why do I carry these burdens?
- what's in store for me at the end?

These are the questions that our tradition poses to us as we set off both together and alone on our journey through the High Holy Days – and through life.

There is a verse in Psalm 16 that reads: “You show me the path of life.” One of our ancient commentaries on this verse tells us that it reflects a question once asked by Israel during the Days of Awe much the same question you and I share with Isaac. When Israel asked God “Show me the path of life”, God is said to have responded: “Behold, here are ten days for you to do Teshuvah between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.” The path of a life welllived is the way of Teshuvah, a way of return. It begins with feeling genuine remorse for our moral failings, but it must go beyond this. It is also to attempt to redeem our mistakes when we are not able to entirely correct them. And if all of this is done well, it is, finally, to restore to ourselves a sense of purity, integrity, and inner peace.

#### THE INTERVENING DAYS

When we leave the sanctuary and our formal services, we go forth to the hard work of mature adult life, 7 days that have brought us to this Kol Nidre night.

#### YOM KIPPUR – A SACRED PILGRIMAGE TO LIFE EVERLASTING

On Kol Nidre night, as on Rosh Hashanah eve, candles are lit, and all things are dressed in white. But now, the meaning of these practices is quite different. Now there is one candle lit in memory of our loved ones who have died. Now, as for the medieval Jew, white garments are a color of death and mourning. The medieval Jew was buried in a white kittel, a white shroud – and he wore this garment of death in the synagogue on this day.

Many of the observances of Yom Kippur are the same as those of mourning. Leather shoes are not worn. One does not bathe or shave or pare one's nails. Marital relations are not permitted. And, as on the first day following a death, one fasts. Those who keep Yom Kippur in traditional ways, just as those who mourn, live almost as though they were dead themselves.

You ask: "What has death to do with Yom Kippur, and what has this to do with me?" Simply this: Yom Kippur wants to tear me away from my normal preoccupation with life. All my life I live among others. It is hard for me to recognize that despite all the ties of love and family and friends, I am in the end, alone.

Death is aloneness. No one can die for me. I cannot ask another to be my surrogate, to take my place. When I die, I die, and no one else. So, to face death vicariously on Yom Kippur is to face the reality of my aloneness. The basic decisions I make the decisions which have to do with the quality of my life, the ends and purposes of my being these decisions I make alone and I alone must accept the, consequences. On Yom Kippur, I am encouraged to face death so that I will face the loneliness of responsibility and its ultimate significance.

Yom Kippur challenges me to accept my ultimate loneliness and my ultimate responsibility. It challenges me as well to find the life goals which are true and meaningful for me and me alone. And if I have the power, the courage and the will to approach Yom Kippur in this way, the day will not come only as an anticipation of my death. In addition, its last moments will see the beginning of a consecrated life. Out of death there will come a sense of renewed life and purpose. Out of death will come rebirth.

#### NEILAH

This is the message of Neilah, the concluding service of Yom Kippur. Neilah begins the moment that Yizkor, the Memorial Service ends. As though at the threshold of death itself, there is an urgency to Neilah. It is an urgency conveyed to me by the image of the gates of heaven closing. Like death itself, I am not certain what lies beyond the gates, but there is hope.

For what is the last sound I will hear when the gates have finally closed? It will be this: the sound of the shofar calling Tekiah Gedolah – the great and lusty cry of a world and souls reborn, wailing as the first breath of new life is inhaled.

I pray that our journey through these Ten Days of Awe this year and every year has led us to the precipice of rebirth, renewal, and return.

Birth is a beginning

And death a destination.

**And life is a journey,  
A sacred pilgrimage –  
To life everlasting.**

**G'mar Chatima Tovah – May you be sealed for sweet year of rebirth, renewal, and return.**