



Temple Beth Sholom

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Rabbi Cohen Sermon Archive

Yizkor 5771

Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen

Don't Try To Outwit God

I love my job! For many of you, this is a relief to know that your rabbi loves her job. And yes, like most of us, there are times that I feel overwhelmed or exhausted from long days, but ultimately, when I take the time to reflect, I can say, I love my job.

As humans, we strive to work – whether it is at a paying job through a company, office or independent business; or if we are stay at home parents, artists, or retired; we all strive to work one way or another. It's our way of allowing our inner creative self to shine through and we thrive when we are able to express ourselves.

But work, in all its forms, allows us to feel useful. Whether it is the to-do list at work or the "honey-do" list at home, work allows us to shape our days and give us somewhere to go when we get up in the morning. Those days when we have nothing to do, we tend to wander around and ask, 'what should I do today?' I don't know about you, but I have a very hard time just sitting around doing nothing. I have to plan out my "nothing" days just so I can have a plan. When we are working or checking off the to-do list, we feel creative and we feel a sense of fulfillment and ingenuity. All of this should never be minimized.

As we shared this morning, back in *Gan Eden*, the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had it pretty easy, or so we thought. Their lives were simple: hang out in the Garden, play with the animals, enjoy the perfect weather, and savor the wonderful food that was provided. There was no need to till the soil, no need to worry about the laundry, and no need to worry about the kids. Just eat, sleep, and play. Ahhh, what a life! There was only one rule that they needed to obey – don't eat from the tree of knowledge. Everything else was fair game. Just follow this simple rule and Adam and Eve could go on living in this utopia for all their days without number.

But they ate from the Tree of Knowledge and from there, they were sent into the world having to till their own soil, gather their own food, and now with the knowledge that someday they would die.

Adam and Eve's punishment was not that they **would** die, it was the **knowledge** that someday they would die. Humanity was not condemned to die, we were just made aware that we are not immortal.

While we wish we could think that we are immune from getting sick or from death, we know that this is not true. We know that no one is immune from illness, after all, there are so many who are stricken with disease that we would say that they 'do not deserve this fate.' We all can agree that no one deserves to be stricken with a disease. And when we learn of a loved one who is diagnosed with cancer, leukemia, or a tumor, we think, how unfair, how unjust.

For those who have endured pain and suffering, one asks, "what did I do to deserve this?" For some reason, we feel better if we can identify something we did that was so terrible that it merited such punishment. It restores our faith that the world makes sense. Chances are we have not done something to deserve bad luck or bad health. The inescapable truth is that there are people who die who do not deserve to die; people who get sick who do not deserve to get sick.

Knowledge of our own mortality makes us step back and take life a little more seriously. Albert Schweitzer once wrote: "We must all become familiar with the thought of death if we want to grow into really good people...Thinking about death produces love for life."

Our time here is precious because we know we have a limited supply of it and there is no way we can buy more. No one knows how long we have, even when someone tries to give us an approximate amount left in our lifespan. Each moment is a gift and we must treat it as so. Time seems to move more quickly as we get older, like it's slipping through our fingers not allowing us to keep hold.

The knowledge that our years are limited makes our choices matter. If we had all the time in the world, if we could indeed live forever, what we chose to do would not matter as much. What

we didn't do today, what we got wrong today, we could get around to doing right another day.

Rachel Naomi Remen shares a story about how two people's lives are changed through illness and recovery. (Rachel Naomi Remen, 2001)

First, we meet Bob. Bob was a strong man who "had been a pirate of a man, pushing himself to the limit, enjoying his family, his friends, his work, his food, and his drink." However, over time, there were limits placed on his life because of a bad heart. He never let his diagnosis of heart disease dissuade him from taking walks and being active. But when he was given a pacemaker, life changed for him. His joy of life, always so infectious, seemed gone. Bob was capable of running and living life to the fullest, but after his surgery, he rarely left the house and he was afraid to be alone.

When Bob's wife finally confronted him about this, he said, he was afraid that the battery in his pacemaker would fail and "the mechanism that now occupied the center of his body had come to occupy the center of his life."

When Bob showed his long scar he said, "I see this and I feel as if I am broken and have been repaired. Before, I felt sick but I was whole."

The second story is that of Rachel's Mom who also was diagnosed with heart disease. Her condition was such that she would collapse unexpectedly in a cardiac arrest. Once, Rachel's Mom collapsed, Rachel and the paramedics resuscitated her, put her to bed after this experience, and an hour later, Rachel's Mom had her hat and gloves and was walking toward the door. Rachel asked her, "Mom, where are you going?" She gave Rachel a smile and said, "To Bingo, it starts at two," and she left.

Rachel was always concerned about her Mother's medications. There were so many different colored pills. Rachel tried to just trust her Mother's doctor when it came to her prescriptions, but Rachel couldn't help but pull her own copy of *Physician's Desk Reference* off the shelf and read about all the medications her Mom was taking.

Rachel was concerned about all the warnings about drug interaction and missing doses. From that time on, Rachel would stand with her Mom at the counter as she counted out her pills trying to gently remind her Mom to not forget the blue one, take only a half of the green one and only one of the yellow pills. This went on for a few weeks until one morning Rachel's Mom looked at her and said, "Rachel, do you know that I will die when it is my time? Not one second before and not one second after. And when that happens, you will probably tell yourself some sort of a story: 'It was because she forgot the yellow one or because she took two blue ones.' But that will not be the real reason at all." She held out her hand with the pills, showing them to Rachel and said, "You don't think that these things can outwit God, do you?"

Rachel's Mom's eyes never lost that glow or the laughter and compassion that they always shown. Even after all the heart medications and diagnosis she knew that life and death were not always in her hands.

But we like to think that we have control over life and death. We try to outwit death by using that which we learn through science and medicine. But ultimately, we turn inward to our faith toward prayer and religion.

"When we are young, we turn to religion to help us find our way in the world, to make us prosperous, to make our dreams come true. When we reach middle age, we turn to religion to give us peace of mind and peace of soul. But when we grow old, we turn to religion to help us defeat death, our own and that of the people we love. We pray that the biopsy result will be favorable, that the surgery will succeed, that the illness will pass. And when we reluctantly conclude that God cannot keep us alive forever no matter how good or pious we are, we ask God to teach us to conquer death in another way, by giving us the blessing of memory." (Kushner, 1997)

During this yizkor moment, we reach for the memories of our loved ones who are no longer with us. We strive to hold on to the images of their faces, the sounds of their voices, and the feel of their touch. And yes, memories can be painful. Good memories deepen the poignancy of what we have lost. Bad memories keep the resentment alive when the occasion is long past. But memory is what ultimately gives us power over death, by keeping the person alive in our hearts. Memory is what gives us power over time by keeping the past present so that it cannot fade and rob us of what we once held precious. And as far as we know, only human beings have that. In a sense, our time on earth is limited, but in another sense it is not. Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote: "We not only have today; we have all the yesterdays we are capable of remembering and all the tomorrows we can envision."

But when we have lost, we feel that a piece of our greater whole is missing. We try to fill the void but nothing seems to fit just right. We are a part of the story of the missing piece told by

Rabbi Kushner.

Once there was a circle that was missing a piece. A large triangular wedge had been cut out of it. The circle wanted to be whole, with nothing missing, so it went around looking for its missing piece. But because it was incomplete, it could only roll very slowly as it rolled through the world. And as it rolled slowly, it admired the flowers along the way. It chatted with butterflies. It enjoyed the sunshine.

It found lots of pieces, but none of them fit. Some were too big and some were too small. Some were too square and some too pointy. So it left them all by the side of the road and kept on searching.

Then one day it found a piece that fit perfectly. It was so happy. Now it could be whole, with nothing missing. It incorporated the missing piece into itself and began to roll. Now that it was a perfect circle, it could roll very fast, too fast to notice the flowers, too fast to talk to the butterflies. When it realized how different the world seemed when it rolled through it so quickly, it stopped, left its missing by the side of the road, and rolled slowly away, looking for its missing piece.

When we lose a loved one, we are missing a piece of ourselves. We try to fill that missing piece in our selves only to realize that it can never be fully realized. We try to fill the void of our loss, but we can find wholeness when we come to terms with the missing piece in our lives and then learning that we are strong enough to get through a loss and survive.

These moments of yizkor memory remind us that our time here in this life is limited but it should not mean that we ourselves are limited. Some of us are broken and have been repaired. Some of us are broken and will never be repaired. But all of us know that life is not meant to be a process of counting days. It is about being in this moment and this place. We are well too aware of our own immortality, but that is a gift, not a curse. It is a gift for we are able to be here now. And when the time comes that we are no longer here, our loved ones will be missing a piece of us, yet they will be made whole once again through the power of memory.

May we be blessed during this Yizkor moment with the love of memory, the joy of the journey, and the kiss of our loved ones who give us strength to live here, today.

Amen

Kushner, H. (1997). *How Good Do We Have to Be? A New Understanding of Guilt and Forgiveness*. San Francisco: Back Bay Books.

Rachel Naomi Remen, M. (2001). *My Grandfather's Blessings*. New York: Riverhead Books.

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