

Yom Kippur Morning
October 5, 2022 – 10 Tishrei 5783
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
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After 25 years as rabbi of Congregation Emanu El of Westchester, the temple affixed a plaque to the temple wall at the entrance to the sanctuary. The plaque acknowledged my years at the temple. Several weeks passed and, after a bar mitzvah, a guest approached me and asked, “Are you the rabbi who is here for 25 years?” I remarked “Yes” He broke into a full smile and said “that is amazing. In my congregation rabbis stay for only two years. At the end of that time, they either leave us, or we leave them.” I was here for 43 years as your rabbi before Rabbi Goldsmith, and I could not have turned over the rabbinate to a more exceptional person.

So what did I learn in the years I served as rabbi? What legacy did you leave me? One gift of wisdom that I received dates to the time when this sanctuary was built. Cars stopped on the Cross Westchester to watch a giant crane, brought in from Michigan, erect the beams for the ceiling, which soars some 36 feet. When the roof went up the chairman of the construction committee, called out to me “Climb up here Dan, it’s a wonderful view.” Little did he know that I was scared of heights but as a new rabbi I felt it was my duty to vanquish fear and start climbing. Also, as a fallback position I concluded that that height would bring me closer to God. So I went up and stood on the edge where all the beams joined. I regained my composure— Until I was told that it was time to climb down! That was scary, and I remembered the first time I went skiing and the ski patrol had to rescue me at the top of the mountain in a toboggan because I was afraid to descend.

Climbing and rappelling from our temple structure was symbolic of much of life: namely life is a combination of ups and downs. We would like our life to be smooth and steady, but it never is. For much of our lives we worry about the uncertainty of life and what the future may hold for us. Quoting from the Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown says, “worrying won’t stop the bad stuff from happening, it just stops you from enjoying the good stuff.”

Certainly in the past several years we have lived with uncertainty. Will I become sick, will a loved one or friend succumb to the pandemic? How do we live in an age of anxiety?

Perhaps part of the answer lies in an image presented by the philosopher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff. Gurdjieff pictures himself standing on a desert plot as he draws a circle in the sand around himself---a circle that prevents him from leaving. Gurdjieff is trapped. He knows that a single step will bring freedom, but he is unable to step out. The prison in the sand is of his own making and could be easily breached----but he can’t do it.

Victor Frankl, reflecting on the Holocaust wrote: “everything can be taken from a man but one thing, the last of the human freedoms– To choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.” How often do we trap ourselves in imaginary circles of our own making? How often does fear or stasis prevent us from doing what would lead to a positive outcome? How do we face life when we find ourselves at the peak of despair? Walk out of the circle. No matter what.

In recent days I was at my home in the Adirondacks as the leaves began to turn. As I looked at a maple tree lining the driveway, I noticed some leaves had turned brown. It was the end of a season but as my gaze fixed on the tree, I saw bright red leaves. I said to myself don’t focus on the brown aspects of life. Focus on the colors. Each day discover some color in your life. It is there. You only need to search.

I remember a visit to Yad Vashem, the monument to the Holocaust in Jerusalem. Most of you probably know this dramatic and sad site. As you wander through a maze of photos and articles detailing the tragedy of the holocaust you feel engulfed by the horrors that man can inflict upon man. And indeed, you are embraced by death. As I made my way through the chronicle of the holocaust I followed an elderly man, old enough to be a survivor, who sat in a wheelchair pushed by his grandson. At the end of the exhibit the main aisle of the holocaust museum opens onto a landscape filled with the roof tops of Jerusalem and a forest of evergreens. The man and his grandson stopped and looked out on the scene before them. And the grandson asked: "Zaide how can you immerse yourself in the midst of all those atrocities that we just saw?" Much to my surprise the grandfather gave a light smile and patted his grandson lovingly on the head. "That period was horrendous" he replied, "but look where we are today. Look at that new growth, look at Jerusalem. A new beginning. We were not vanquished. We fall only to rise again and that is the true history of our people. Nothing ends unless something else begins. I survived and chose to go on with my life." As a people we go from strength to strength. We have learned over many centuries that life does have its ups and downs, but the secret of life is that we go on. As Jews and as part of humanity. We go on. Always.

Not too many years ago there was a professor at Carnegie Mellon University by the name of Randy Pautsch. Carnegie Mellon has a tradition that when a professor is retiring he can deliver a last lecture to students as a legacy for the next generation. They are a professors' core principles. But Randy Pautsch was not retiring. He was dying, afflicted with pancreatic cancer at the age of 47. His lecture was widely publicized but what is not as well-known is that he had arranged that after his death a weekly bouquet of flowers would be delivered to his wife. This would continue every week for 52 weeks. Then, on the 52nd second week the bouquet arrived with a note that I paraphrase "Dear, this is the last bouquet you will receive from me. Now get on with your life."

Get on with your life!

Many of us encounter difficult moments when it might seem hard to go on. Time stops or is put on hold. The path we chose, the dreams we envisioned for ourselves, disappear in the darkness of night. I know. I have known sickness, loss, personal distress. I have experienced those moments. Yes, they are not distant from me.

In our Yom Kippur service, there is a beautiful short reading:

Ten thousand flowers in spring, the moon in autumn
A cool breeze in summer, snow in winter
If your mood isn't clouded by unnecessary things,
This is the best season of your life.

What is the best season of our life?

Today.

Therefore, as Jews, on this holiest of days, as humans created in the image of God, I extend my wishes for a good year. But I would also add these final words:

No matter who you are, or whatever you may have experienced -- Get on with your life. Get on with your life. Every season, every day. For that is the blessing bequeathed to each of us.

L'Shanah Tovah