Living What Truly Matters

Before we get to Yom Kippur, a story about Hanukkah.

When I was a young boy, I always looked forward to celebrating Hanukkah. One of my favorite parts was perhaps unique to my family. Each year, our family would gather around a felt board that my mother had made, complete with the cast of Hanukkah-related characters for me to "present" to my audience (and by audience I mean my siblings and cousins)!

One part of the story I particularly remember was related to a woman named Hannah and her seven sons. The evil king Antiochus wanted Hannah and each of her seven sons to bow down to him, and to worship idols like the Greeks, and he threatened to kill them if they did not comply. One by one, each of the sons refused, and one by one, I would throw the little felt sons off of the felt board to their death (a bit too gleefully, I might add). At the end, only Hannah and her youngest son Benjamin were left. When given the final ultimatum, Hannah and Benjamin chose death- rather than submit to the demand that they bow down to anything other than Adonai.

In retrospect, this was a pretty dark story for a child to tell. And, it would be understandable if anyone hearing this story asked, "what's the big deal?" Just bow down to Antiochus and the idols, pretend that you renounce your Jewish

faith, and move on. We are all familiar with moments in our history when Jews pretended to abandon their Jewish faith and traditions. Like the conversos, the Jews who, during the Spanish Inquisition, chose to "convert" rather than be expelled or killed. And of course we are all familiar with Jews during the Holocaust who chose to hide their children among Christians, instructing them to pretend to live as Christian children.

Is there really anything, of greater importance in the Jewish cannon, than the value of our very lives? Indeed the Talmud teaches that to "save one life, is to save a whole world,"[1] and that we are permitted to violate Shabbat in order to save a life[2]?

Yes, this is true, Judaism puts incredibly high value on human life. It's the most important thing *most* of the time. But there were three exceptions. As Rabbi Yohanan taught in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadaak:

> **[In most cases] If a person is told: Transgress** this prohibition **and you will not be killed, he may transgress** that prohibition **and not be killed,** because the preservation of his own life overrides all of the Torah's prohibitions.
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> This is the law concerning all prohibitions **except for** those of **idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and bloodshed.** Concerning those prohibitions, one must allow himself to be killed rather than transgress them.[3]

[1] (Sanhedrin 37a)
[2] (Yoma 85b)
[3] (Sanhedrin 74a).

In other words, here we are taught that our lives are worth saving at almost any cost, unless it comes to violating one of these three commandments – murder, sexual impropriety, and idol worship. The rabbis are teaching that these three prohibitions are SO important, that we should do anything to avoid them, including even losing our lives. This is the principle that led Hannah and her sons to submit to death rather than worship idols.

Harsh? Perhaps. Realistic? Perhaps not. But this Talmudic principle invites us to consider an interesting question on the holiest night of the year. Is there ***any belief, any principle*** that matters, so much, that it is worth sacrificing our very lives? Or, to put it in a slightly more palatable way, what beliefs and principles are SO essential, SO important to us, that we must prioritize them over all else? And then we must reflect and ask ourselves if our lives truly reflect these beliefs and principles. If we live in a way that is true to what I claim to believe (especially when no one else is watching)?

One of the main metaphors of Yom Kippur is God as "judge." The idea that God is always aware of our actions. Does God care about each of our small actions? Does God actively intervene to punish us? Does God even get involved? These are all unanswerable questions. But on Yom Kippur we take one day to consider, to imagine, that God does care, and is involved, and we must

stand in front of God with all pretenses removed, for God's "ultimate judgement."

On Yom Kippur, a day that we are taught is like Purim *(Yom k'Purim*)- we are asked to consider what our life looks like when all of the masks we wear are removed; when we have nothing to show for ourselves except for the plain and simple reality of how we actually behaved this past year.

How did we do? Did we live a life of principle, or did we compromise our most deeply held beliefs? Did we live a life of integrity, or were we prone to moments of hypocrisy? Did we focus on what really matters, or were we distracted?

All of this is reminiscent of that scene in the musical Hamilton, when Alexander Hamilton says to Aaron Burr: "*If you stand for nothing, Burr, what'll you fall for?*" What do you stand for? What values define your life? And how do these values show up, day in and day out, in your actions and behaviors?

As I said on Rosh Hashanah, something feels very wrong in our society today. Something feels very off. And, based on my daily conversations with members of our community, almost everyone – regardless of political affiliations or loyalties – are almost all wondering: "What has happened to the world today? What has

happened to the world that I thought I knew?" It's certainly easy to despair about the mess of society, of our country, of the world.

But while these are important questions, on Yom Kippur the more critical question is **what has happened to me**? Or, perhaps instead- **what *have I allowed*** to happen to me?

It is very easy to lose our way, very easy to get distracted. We *say* that all sorts of things are important- as individuals and as a community. We *say* that we value our families, our children and grandchildren, our partners, and our friends. But how much time do we spend tending to those relationships? We *say* that as a community we value our synagogue, our democracy, our environment, living in safety and security, peace, decency, respect- you get the picture. But if we were to die tomorrow, as Yom Kippur reminds us is entirely possible, what would people say at our funeral? Would we be remembered as people who truly lived according to their purported values?

What will be your legacy? What is the most important thing that you stand for and what messages will you leave behind? It is true that we are all flawed human beings. And Judaism does explicitly teach that God will forgive our missteps if we are sincere in our willingness to change, in our willingness to do teshuvah, to turn, and re-turn, to our purest selves, our best selves. But **we** are the

only ones that can do the turning and re-turning. **We** are the only ones who can right our ship if we have been travelling in the wrong direction.

This is not easy. God does not do this work "for us," so to speak. We make mistakes- *all of the time*. We get distracted, *all of the time*. We forget our most basic fundamental beliefs, from time to time. We promise to try harder next time. And when "next time" comes around, we often repeat the cycle, again heading in the wrong direction, and again vowing to try harder yet again.

Over and over, day in and day out, from childhood through adulthood, as mortal, fallible human beings, many of us are all too familiar with this frustrating exercise in daily living. Yom Kippur is offering us the opportunity to act like the GPS in our cars that auto-corrects when we take a wrong turn. But *unlike the GPS*, when it comes to changing directions in our life, change does not come from an external satellite. Rather, it must come from our internal compass. Yom Kippur, indeed this entire season, pushes us to re-direct ourselves, using our faith, the teachings of our tradition, and our most sacred convictions as our central navigation system.

So, you might want to ask the rabbi – what does Judaism say should be our most important value? Throughout Jewish texts there are various attempts to identify **the** essential belief that defines us as Jews. One example is the Talmudic lesson,

teaching that it's better to die than commit three particular transgressions. But there are others.

The prophet Micah focused on justice, goodness, and humility, preaching: *What does God require of us: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God*[4].

The prophet Jeremiah prioritized trust in God: *Blessed is the man who trusts in GOD, Whose trust is GOD alone. He shall be like a tree planted by waters, Sending forth its roots by a stream: It does not sense the coming of heat, Its leaves are ever fresh; It has no care in a year of drought, It does not cease to yield fruit.* In other words, it is our faith that ultimately keeps us grounded throughout life.

Our sages in the Talmud taught that "Talmud Torah k'neged Kulam," elevating Torah learning, study, as the thing that is equivalent to doing all of the other mitzvot.

And, of course, there is the well-known adage from Hillel, focusing on our behavior towards one another: "*What is hateful to you, do not do unto your neighbor."*[5]

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[4] *(6:8)*

[5] *(BT Shabbat 31a)*.

So which one is it? Which of these core Jewish values is the most important? Which of these values should we prioritize? Justice? Goodness? Humility? Faith? Learning? Or kindness? Our tradition's answer is, of course, all of them. But Yom Kippur asks each one of us to answer this question for ourselves.

If I asked you to share the three most important principles or values that guide your life, what would you say? And then consider – if asked, would your children or grandchildren describe you according to these values? Would your friends, neighbors, or colleagues?

Some of you might remember the 1950's radio show, "This I Believe" hosted by journalist Edward R. Murrow. Each day, the show featured compelling essays, written by famous people like Eleanor Roosevelt and Jackie Robinson, as well as essays written by corporate leaders, cab drivers, scientists, and secretaries — "regular" people who were asked to concisely identify the guiding principle or value by which they lived. At the time, these essays were meant to help people focus on what was really important, hopefully bringing comfort and inspiration to a world worried about the Cold War, McCarthyism, and racial division.

Perhaps, one of the ways out of our own divisions as a country today is a return to these basics, a return to sharing with one another what it is that we believe.

There is a reason that we have at various times asked members of our community to share personal "Jewish journeys" with one another on Shabbat. We have tried to create a space that allows for us to both get to know one another on a deeper level, but also allows each of us to consider what is important to us when it comes to our beliefs. There is a reason why when someone in our community has a yahrtzeit, we encourage them to share memories of the individual who they are remembering. We want to learn who this individual was, what they stood for, what mattered to them.

This is a community where we emphasize the importance of each individual considering what is most important in life; where we strive to remember what truly matters and what Judaism demands of us, in order to help us figure out how we should live, how we should be in this world.

I will conclude with one example from a 2005 revived version of "This I Believe." An attorney named Diedre Sullivan said the following:

> I believe in always going to the funeral. My father taught me that.
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> The first time he said it directly to me, I was 16 and trying to get out of going to calling hours for Miss Emerson, my old fifth grade math teacher. I did not want to go. My father was unequivocal. "Dee," he said, "you're going. Always go to the funeral. Do it for the family."
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> So my dad waited outside while I went in. It was worse than I thought it would be: I was the only kid there. When the condolence line deposited me in front of Miss Emerson's shell-shocked parents, I stammered out, "Sorry

about all this," and stalked away. But, for that deeply weird expression of sympathy delivered 20 years ago, Miss Emerson's mother still remembers my name and always says hello with tearing eyes.

That was the first time I went un-chaperoned, but my parents had been taking us kids to funerals and calling hours as a matter of course for years. By the time I was 16, I had been to five or six funerals.

Sullivan continued:

"[It] Sounds simple — when someone dies, get in your car and go to calling hours or the funeral. That, I can do. But I think a personal philosophy of going to funerals means more than that.

"Always go to the funeral" means that I have to do the right thing when I really, really don't feel like it. I have to remind myself of it when I could make some small gesture, but I don't really have to and I definitely don't want to. I'm talking about those things that represent only inconvenience to me, but the world to the other guy. You know, the painfully under-attended birthday party. The hospital visit during happy hour. The Shiva call for one of my ex's uncles. In my humdrum life, the daily battle hasn't been good versus evil. It's hardly so epic. Most days, my real battle is doing good versus doing nothing.

In going to funerals, I've come to believe that while I wait to make a grand heroic gesture, I should just stick to the small inconveniences that let me share in life's inevitable, occasional calamity.

On a cold April night three years ago, my father died a quiet death from cancer. His funeral was on a Wednesday, in the middle of the workweek. I had been numb for days when, for some reason, during the funeral, I turned and looked back at the folks in the church. The memory of it still takes my breath away. The most human, powerful and humbling thing I've ever seen was a church at 3:00 on a Wednesday full of inconvenienced people who believe in going to the funeral.

It is Yom Kippur. Our own funerals could come at any moment. So, what do you believe? What is most essential to you in life? What is your guiding principle? What do you stand for? What keeps you grounded, focused, and rooted in this world that can be confusing, confounding, and deeply unsettling? Behind me, on our most sacred ark, are the words "*Da Lifnei Mi Atah Omed,*" "Know Before Whom You Stand." Today, as we stand before God, I urge each one of you to consider not just **before** Whom we stand, but **for what** we stand as we endeavor to begin another year, living our lives accordingly.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah,