

## Yom Kippur 5772 Sermon

*My Ethical Will; Living Life Backwards*

*by Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner*

A Catholic priest, a Protestant minister and a rabbi were having lunch when the conversation turned toward their own mortality. They began discussing what they'd like said of them at their own funerals. The Priest shared, "I would like it said that I was a faithful servant of the Church." The minister then responded, "I would like it said that I inspired others by my devotion to the good news of the Gospels." After a pause, the rabbi offered, "At my funeral, I would like someone to say 'Look, he's moving!'"

Beyond the laughter stands a serious subtext: How do you wish to be remembered? What is it that you would like others to say at your funeral? That day will come, and let's be honest -- whatever else someone says, it isn't likely to be "Look, he's moving!"

Jews have been creating ethical wills for centuries. They are letters to the future, written to share with our loved ones and descendants the fruit of the life experiences we have gleaned during our years on earth. Said Rava, a Babylonian sage of the late third century C.E., "When a person is brought to judgment in the world to come, he will be asked: 'Did you conduct your affairs with integrity? Did you make time for the study of Torah? Did you occupy yourself with raising a family? Did you hope for Israel's redemption and for universal peace? Did you search for wisdom? Did you acquire understanding?'" (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 31a). The answer to questions like these furnish the aspirations from which to frame a legacy worth bequeathing to a future yet unborn.

Life is best lived backward -- if you know what you wish to accomplish on earth, it's far easier to connect the dots in reverse from the future back to the present. The real challenge is to then actually follow our own game-plan. Habitual procrastinators that most of us are, it's so easy to get sidetracked from the purpose-driven life. This afternoon I would like to share my ethical will with you. Perhaps one day -- I hope it won't be for many years -- you may hear these words again, though they'll be delivered by someone else or via a recording. At that time, you will have to decide

whether or not I succeeded in designing my quest to live life backward by design.

The idea of writing an ethical will first occurred to me during a period of concern about my own health. A number of years ago I began suffering from a chronic sore throat, and had noticed that my voice sounded perpetually hoarse. I needed to constantly clear my throat, and most frighteningly, started to have trouble swallowing. Having watched my father-in-law go through cancer of the esophagus, and having helped a congregant deal with his own terminal case of the disease a number of years earlier, I remembered these were among the very symptoms they experienced. In considering the possibility that my life might soon be over, I was overwhelmed by numerous regrets, and keenly felt I hadn't always made the best use of the years given me.

Thank God, I was fortunate. It turned out that I suffered from a loose sphincter at the lower end of my esophagus; it was this, not cancer, that caused my silent reflux. By losing weight, changing my diet, and taking a daily dose of a prescription to control stomach acid, my symptoms soon disappeared.

But the experience got me thinking. There will come a day when my file is pulled from the cabinet of life. If I didn't want to be overwhelmed by a flood of "if only's, I'd have to approach the business of living differently.

Death is not a dirty word. If we believe in a God who is good, then death isn't some cruel joke, but a purposeful part of life by making us realize how precious it is -- the value of any resource is proportionate to its scarcity. And so the Day of Atonement arrives each year like a certain Charles Dickens story, in which the ghosts of Yom Kippur past, present and future remind us that forever isn't in the cards. In a beautiful way Yom Kippur offers a dress rehearsal for death, without the need for a health scare or a close brush with the grave. Of course, if we'd rather learn the hard way, well, that choice is ours to make.

So let me begin in the same way I start each day, with the conviction that time is a gift from God. When I open my eyes each morning I quietly offer a brief Hebrew prayer: מוֹדָה אֲנִי

לְפָנֶיךָ, מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם, שֶׁחֲזַרְתָּ בִּי נְשָׁמָתִי בְּחַמְלָה, רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ.  
-- Before you, eternal living Sovereign, I thank You for mercifully returning my soul to me; Your faithfulness is great. After using the bathroom each morning and washing my hands I recite another blessing thanking God for the gift of my body . You may think this a bit much -- a *berakha* for using the toilet? But, yes, it's in our *siddur* (check it out in the *mahzor*, p. 35) -- as well it should be. So many people wake up in the morning without considering that the ability to get out of bed is God's free gift to them. Having nearly lost a kidney when I was in my twenties, I appreciate the gift of working plumbing. So many of the people I have visited in hospitals over the years, people on dialysis, with ostomy bags, or in adult diapers, would give anything to recite the bathroom *berakhah* as healthy individuals. Find some way to say thank you for all the daily miracles you take for granted -- the more grateful a person you are, the more of a *mensch* you'll become.

There was a time when I'd rush out the door even if I hadn't kissed my wife or my children. Not anymore. If it makes me late, so what? This, too, is part of appreciating every day as a gift. I can't encourage you enough . . . take a minute to hug your children, compliment your spouse and kiss her or him. If you knew you'd never see your family again, what's the last image you'd want to leave them with? Consider those who rushed out the door to the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001, who neglected to say goodbye lest they miss their train. By accepting our mortality as both fragile and precious, we transcend its finitude by maximizing the impact of every moment.

Keep growing. Life is a perpetual journey of exploration. Each year I have tried to stretch and grow myself in some new way. Sometimes it was by taking on additional ritual *mitzvot*. It may surprise you to know that as a rabbinical student I didn't *daven* each morning. I knew I was supposed to, but sometimes it got lost in the shuffle. At the age of thirty, however, I made the commitment to put on *tefillin* and *daven* every morning -- a promise that by-and-large I have kept. At the age of forty I decided I'd *daven* the afternoon and evening services each day, whether or not at services or alone. In the last ten years alone I've added bibliodrama and meditation to my spiritual and professional regimen; I even learned to dance (sort of). Should I live to be fifty, sixty, seventy and eighty, I will continue to expand my horizons and embrace new opportunities to grow

myself. Never confuse the word *ōcanætō* with *ōwonæt.ō* The blessing of stretching yourself can only make you wiser, more thoughtful, more spiritually supple. By the same token, now and again revisit your most cherished beliefs and assumptions -- your core values should never change, but if none of your opinions and perspectives evolve over time, you are likely to be leading a stunted existence. I am saddened by the many individuals who reach a point in their lives where they simply stop growing inwardly. Yet in a profoundly true sense, when we stop growing, at that moment we begin to die -- even if our bodies remain healthy for years to come.

There's a story told about Rabbi Simcha Bunim, a Hasidic Rebbe who lived in Poland at the turn of the 19th century. He counseled every person to keep two pieces of paper in his pocket. On one would be written, *ōFor my sake the world was created.ō* On the other, it would say, *ōI am nothing but dust and ashes.ō* When a person becomes too vain and proud of himself, he would pull out the slip reminding him, *ōI am nothing but dust and ashes.ō* On the other hand, should a person become too self-critical, he would take out the message reading, *ōFor my sake the world was created.ō*

I have always tended to be self-effacing and, consequently, in need of the latter message more than the former. With much hard work and practice, I am happy to say that I've become more accepting of my own human frailties. What a terrible waste of precious time beating oneself up because of a lack of perfection! I will share with you an excerpt of a poem by author Marianne Williamson, a poem which I keep on my desk within easy reach -- it's my equivalent of Rabbi Simcha Bunim's piece of paper:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented fabulous? Actually who are you not to be? You are a child of God . . ."*

I have learned the more accepting you are of your own imperfections, the more comfortable you are in taking responsibility for your mistakes; when error is no longer proof of your unworthiness, but a simple miscalculation, it's much easier to swallow. Equally important, when you can see the warts and pimples that are part of your spiritual complexion and still love yourself,

the better equipped you will be to see the faults of others and still respect them; in other words, the more compassionate you become. The Psalmist hit the nail on the head when he wrote: **מִה־אֲנוּשׁ**

**כִּי־תִזְכְּרֵנוּ וּבֶן־אֲזָם כִּי תִפְקְדָנוּ: וַתַּחֲסֶרְהוּ מֵעַט מֵאֱלֹהִים וְהָדָר תִּעֲטֶרְהוּ:**

-- What is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him? Yet You have made us little lower than the angels, and have adorned us with glory and majesty (Psalm 8:5,6). Human beings are complicated, fragile, vulnerable and imperfect, yet they're sublime, too; amazing and beautiful creatures, they're capable of reaching great heights.

If you truly accept yourself and are comfortable in your own skin, you will also find it easier to take stands because they're right, rather than because they score high on someone's applause meter. I believe that a reluctance to stand up for the good frequently stems from our dependence on the validation of others: it's just as true in a room full of adults as in a class of fifth graders. When you see people who blame others for their own shortcomings, you need not acquiesce; when you hear people use ugly words about others you don't have to nod silently. There is a talmudic saying, **שתיקה כהודיה דמי היא** -- Silence implies consent. If you see wrong-doing, call it out; if not, your silence will be taken as agreement.

On a lighter note, remember to balance life's serious aspect with laughter. My family members will undoubtedly recall the countless pet names I have for them -- at last count nearly 30 for my wife, 10 for my children, and 3 for my mother -- as well as all the silly songs I've spontaneously created over the years while making dinner or driving. If my congregants generally don't see this side of me, it's not because I'm ashamed of it, but because it's something so special that I share it only with my loved ones. Those who take life really seriously, understand to not take it too seriously . . . at least sometimes. Like a mature tree whose trunk contains the rings of its younger years, there is an inner child in each of us -- one filled with silliness, mischief, wonder and affection. Cherish that child; make sure to let him or her out now and again.

I've always wished I were better at delineating boundaries between my role as a rabbi and my life as a husband and father. I apologize to my children for all the times that, exhausted after

services, I opted for a nap on Shabbat afternoon instead of playing ball in the backyard, or the times when I chose to attend a *shul* meeting instead of tucking them into bed. I am sorry for the occasions, and there were more than a few, when I cut my wife short on the phone to get back to work (something I'd never do to a congregant), arrived home for dinner 45 minutes later than I had promised because I allowed an appointment to run over the allotted time, or found my mind wandering to *shul* matters when I should have focused on her. I hope that God gives me the strength and the time to change these bad habits. Regardless of what happens, I do want Susan to know how much I love, respect and need her; the longer we are married, the more I cherish her companionship. I also pray that my children realize they are more beloved and precious to me than they could ever possibly know. While I could be a better husband and father, I have no doubt in my mind that their presence in my life has made me a better human being.

Parents swear up and down they want their children to be their own people, but let's be honest: we harbor hopes, secret and not so secret, about the kind of individuals we'd like our kids to be. Our children are shaped by their genes and their experiences, of course, but they aren't carbon copies of us. Recognizing this engenders both awe and humility in the challenges I face as a parent. I fully acknowledge that my children will make their own choices as they grow up -- where to live, what to do, whom to marry -- and I promise to love them always, regardless of the decisions they make. This does not imply that I must approve their choices, should they be at odds with my value system. I hope they will respect my need to be true to my own inner convictions, especially if they expect me to respect theirs.

I do not know whether or not Avichai, Elior or Itamar will be observant Jews. I hope they are, but not simply because I chose to be observant, but because they will have discovered Judaism's beauty for themselves. My responsibility as a committed Jewish parent is to set the stage and coach them to the best of my ability; the rest will be up to them. If they decide to abandon their practice of Judaism, I won't castigate them or berate myself, knowing that Susan and I did the best we could and understanding that children must find their own way.

Yes, it is my strong desire they marry Jews and raise Jewish children loyal to their people's heritage. If they do not, they will be severing our family's limb from a tree of Jewish peoplehood

that stretches back more than a hundred generations. I say this not as a guilt trip, but but because it's the simple truth. As a Jew I believe we have a responsibility to our ancestors to pass their values on to our children, as well as a responsibility to our children to ground them in their own heritage and history. That being said, my children will feel this or they won't. If they do, and bring home a Jewish spouse, it won't matter to me whether or not she is a practicing Jew-by birth or a sincere Jew-by-choice, white or black, a Jew who is Oriental, Ethiopian, Hispanic or native American. Creating a Jewish home has nothing to do with the color of skin or the shape of one's eyes. Those who believe it does need to work on cleansing their soul of some residual bigotry.

I don't care if my sons become doctors, lawyers, or janitors, so long as they're honest, decent and happy with themselves.. The problem isn't that people set their aim too high or too low, but when their expectations of life are out of sync with the level of investment they're willing to make -- you have to pay your own way, for God has already given you the free gift of life, and we, your parents, have given you a loving home, education, security and a sense of belonging to something bigger than yourself. Life doesn't owe you a blessed thing. On the contrary, inasmuch as God put you on this earth for some purpose beyond your own self-edification, you must give something back to your community, your people, your country, your world.. If you haven't done anything to make the world a better place after you leave it, then your existence will sadly represent a net drain on the universe; an investment by God that didn't pan out. To paraphrase the great Rabbi Tarfon, you can't do everything, but that's no excuse to do nothing.

Never lie. The biggest problem with lying is that in the end the person it hurts most of all is you. Don't think for a minute that when you get away with it, you're home free; lying diminishes a person's soul by eroding his credibility and self-respect. Worst of all, habitual liars often experience the collapse of their fantasy world as it gets harder and harder to keep track of all their lies. My advice is simple: if you find yourself doing something that you will have to lie about later on, then you probably shouldn't be doing it in the first place.

When I die you, my family and friends, will mourn . . . this is how it should be. I have heard well-intentioned individuals over the years tell their loved ones, "When my time comes don't mourn, celebrate instead." With all due respect, I think that's horrible advice. Grief is a normal

human response. If we'd never dream of telling a person to refrain from happiness at a birth or a wedding, why on earth would we tell him not to mourn at a funeral! So cry, go ahead and grieve, but no longer than the time allotted by the wisdom of our tradition. If you, my children, remain observant you'll understand the importance of sitting *shiva* and saying *Kaddish* through the 11 months following my death. If you are no longer observant, I'd still ask you to sit a full *shiva* and say *Kaddish* -- not because I really believe doing so will elevate my soul to heaven as some Orthodox Jews do -- but because the time and effort you take to honor me and the role I played in your lives will make you better human beings. There are too many folks who don't even bother saying *Kaddish* once a year on the *Yahrzeit* of a parent or other close family member . . . even when they know it would have been important to the deceased. It's not a question of being observant, but rather one of being self-centered. I'd like to think your mother and I raised you to not be selfish.

The longer I live the more I believe in a universe filled with invisible lines of connection; like an iceberg whose mass lies hidden below the water line, there's far more to life than we see or understand. Stories of near death experiences, or those who had a feeling about a person's passing at a specific moment thousands of miles away lead me to believe there is a plane of existence beyond this one. What lies behind that door I do not know. One day I will. And one day you will, too. I pray that what Vince Lombardi once said about football will be true of your life as well: "We didn't lose the game; we just ran out of time." Though invariably you will run out of time, with the crown of a good name is it impossible to lose the game. When that day comes, I will be waiting for you in whatever form, shape or manner we exist in the world beyond this one. Eternity is a mystery, yet this much I know: what a sweet blessing it will be to spend it together with you . . .