

Rabbi David M. Frank, Temple Solel, Cardiff, CA Yom Kippur 5775

“Remembering Eitan”

This summer, our close friends lost their 12 year old son. Last Thanksgiving, Eitan became symptomatic, and was eventually diagnosed with a rare form of ALS – Lou Gehrig’s disease. He was only one of 12 known cases of childhood onset ALS, and an enigma to his doctors. In a matter of months, he lost use of his arms, his legs, his whole body.

He became a neighborhood celebrity because he still wanted to be outside in the front yard, near the tree where he used to play with his friends. Under a canopy, he would sit in his wheelchair, and then lie in his special bed for hours, with all the neighbors stopping by the front yard to visit. Eitan’s body had given out on him, but his personality was never dimmed.

One of his great passions was United States’ presidents. He knew them all and in great detail. He actually stumped President Clinton with his trivia. Through the Make a Wish Foundation, President Clinton visited Eitan in his home. Lying on the couch, with Clinton by his side, Eitan asked him whether he could name the first president to be born in a hospital. In case you’re wondering, it was Jimmy Carter, and President Clinton didn’t know the answer, either. But, Clinton later had occasion to be with President Carter and raised the point, after which he wrote a note to Eitan confirming that he was indeed correct. After Eitan died, President Clinton called again to express his condolences. He was one of many who went above and beyond to extend themselves to Eitan and his family. That little boy elicited such an outpouring of good will from his bed in the front yard of his home in Teaneck, N.J.

His parents were, of course, the most devoted. In remarks following Eitan’s death, his dad, Simcha, offered these words:

Two weeks before he passed away we were outside as we were every day. He asked me to take him inside to be changed, which I did. When I was finished I carried him in my arms to go back outside. When we got close to the front door he said "Thank you for all this."

It stopped me in my tracks. In my head I was going "are you freaking kidding me?" But I looked at him, smiled and said, "you are welcome, you know I do it with all my love and my heart, right?" He smiled and said, yes. "Are you ready to go out?" I asked, and he said yes, and we stepped outside.

Thank you for all this!!!! No Eitan, thank YOU for all of this....

For what was Simcha thanking his son? Certainly not for becoming ill, and not for the countless doctor's appointments and diaper changes and feedings and all that became necessary for his care. No, but still, Eitan gave a gift to his parents. He gave them the opportunity to open up their hearts unconditionally to their child, to give selflessly, to sacrifice themselves out of pure love and desire, and to cling tightly to the breath of life that was Eitan. Simcha and Lori and their older daughter Maya were given this shooting meteor of a son and brother for its short journey until it burned out. And they emerged from this fiery experience with gratitude.

I stand in awe. For while they are in deep mourning, they have not become rudderless. They have gratitude. They encountered what the liturgy of this day calls, Roah Ha-gezerah, the kind of harsh decree that life can present to us, and they have offered their human response.

Today, especially, I think about these friends and all they have been through, and all of those in our community whose worlds have been turned upside down by Roah Ha-gezerah, life's harsh decrees. Yom Kippur is our day of total vulnerability. If we allow ourselves to truly feel, then we tremble before the power of the Books of Life and Death being open before us. Today, we acknowledge that in the year to come, death may touch us. We acknowledge that our very existence is fragile and there will be some tragedy and suffering.

And the question we ask is, what can help us? What can give us direction and strength to navigate life's great challenges? Our prayerbook gives us one answer, that on its surface seems not only ludicrous, but possibly even offensive.

After acknowledging that the Books of Life and Death are open before us, and we are to consider who shall live and who shall die – we then recite these words of the U'Netaneh Tokef: that "repentance, prayer, and charity can avert the severity of the decree."

Many have asked me, does this mean what it seems to say – that all we have to do is perform these acts of Teshuvah, of repentance, of Tefillah, of prayer, and of Tzedakah, of charity and God will rewrite our future? And, I would add, if this *is* true, then are Simcha, and Lori, and Maya to believe that Eitan's death is their fault because maybe they didn't do enough Teshuvah or pray hard enough or give enough Tzedakah?

Well, I have no hesitation in telling you that, for me, this kind of theology doesn't work. I reject it because I've seen far too many good people die of tragic illness they didn't deserve, or lose their homes in wildfires, or get wiped out in a recession, or become victims of abuse. So, if this is what the centerpiece of our Yom Kippur liturgy really means, then I guess I would say, let's go eat!

But I do think there is more here, if we're open to the possibility that the U'netaneh Tokef prayer is not talking as much about God, as it is about us, and not offering us so much theology as it is human psychology.

What makes the decree of human suffering more bearable, and if I dare say it, even meaningful? What allows us to echo Simcha's words in the face of horrible loss: "thank you?" It is possible that these three things – Teshuvah, Tefillah, Tzedakah – are the Jewish toolbox that help us turn the sting of a curse into blessing. And that's what I'd like to talk about with you tonight/today.

Last December, I read the story of a young college student named Jackie. Jackie was a straight A student with many friends. But, when holiday time came around, she felt nothing but sadness and isolation. She had no home for the holidays. Reflecting on her childhood, Jackie had this memory: "I remember getting locked up in rooms. And I remember getting beatings for stealing food." She was born to a mother she never met and a father whom she wished she hadn't. Jackie was abused, neglected, and starved. She certainly had no family to go home to for Christmas.

So, last year, she decided that, at least for one day, she would create a family of her own – the kind of family she always hoped to have. How did she do it? As only a college student might, she put an ad in Craig's List: "I want to rent a mom and dad." She said, "maybe for like a couple hours – just be like the light of their life for that moment."

As it turned out, Jackie got dozens of responses – half from parents who wanted to help, and half from other young people who shared her painful dilemma. So, Jackie convened a meeting of all the respondents and matched them up. Jackie even found a match for herself. Tears flowed around the room.

What I find inspiring about Jackie's story is that she created a way to heal from her broken childhood. While she couldn't do anything about her family situation, she didn't let it define her, either. She found a way to leave the past behind, fix what was broken in herself, and create new and healthy relationships.

What an amazing lesson to ponder. It is so true that we can't always fix brokenness in relationships, or bring back our loved ones who've died, or regain the personal treasures we lost in a wildfire, or undo our past mistakes – but we can heal ourselves.

This is Teshuvah at its best, which I would say is mainly about healing – becoming the people we choose to be. The hope of Teshuvah is the hope that,

despite our human imperfection and our vulnerability, we can find a way to wholeness – and turn ourselves from curse to blessing.

And the same can be said of Tefillah, as well, *if* we understand what prayer is. This is something I realized early on in my career. As a young rabbinic student, I would ride the bus to campus each day in Jerusalem. And on that early morning bus, there were always several older men in their shirtsleeves. On their arms, I would notice two things. First, the black, tattooed numbers they bore from the concentration camps. And second, the indentations left by the Tefillin straps they had just wrapped around their arms in their morning prayer. It seemed to me like such a stark contrast. How, after being uprooted and tortured by the Nazis could they still pray?

It took me many years as a rabbi to understand what that kind of prayer is about. Sitting with those who are ill and dying, we have talked about what prayer was for them. And I learned that it is certainly not petition or request for anything. Those who have been through the concentration camps or are stricken by illness know that prayers of that kind didn't change their fate one bit.

But prayer does do something else, something very important. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches us:

To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. ...It is so embarrassing to live! How strange we are in the world, and how presumptuous our doings! Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill. It is gratefulness that makes the soul great.

So those Holocaust survivors with whom I rode the bus each day, despite all that happened to them, still found it within themselves to express gratitude, to find the blessing in each of their days. No matter how difficult life becomes, even when our life is ebbing, there is always something to be grateful for. In this sense, when Simcha eulogized his beloved son, Eitan, his "thank you" was his prayer of gratitude. He found blessing in the intensity of love and loss; he found his prayer.

I once sat by the bed of a beloved congregant, one of our founding members who helped establish this building – our family retreat room bears her family name. Marilyn was a vibrant, loving, and creative woman. But cancer had taken her to the end of her physical power in life. Toward the end, I walked into her bedroom and saw her lovingly swaddled beneath the sheets, looking pure and serene. She was well taken care of by her family and this meant so much to her. We talked about her life's journey and how she was like a mountain climber who had

reached the peak of her ascent. I asked her to visualize the great vista, the wonderful views of all that she had accomplished and experienced in her life. I wanted her to see her death not as defeat, but as a great triumph. She told me how blessed she felt and how grateful she was. I know that she expressed gratitude every day until death finally took her. Marilyn taught me how to pray more deeply.

Prayer is not complicated. I know that sometimes the words in our prayerbook get in the way. But they all boil down to one thing – praise and thanks and gratitude for life’s blessings as long as we are alive. Gratitude is what makes life worth living.

Roy Hoffman is an American journalist who grew up in a southern synagogue in Mobile, Alabama. He had a traditional Jewish upbringing, but soon found himself drifting from Jewish life. However, as fate would have it, he was assigned to the religion beat for his newspaper. So he was covering stories from a lot of different religious traditions, and he eventually discovered that other people’s prayers made him feel closer to his own. He wrote:

I love the recitations at Sabbath services at my congregation, the communal feeling of voices raised together in Hebrew and English and the cantor’s chant. And some prayers, in the sanctuaries of my making, like the bay at sunset, are the ones I compose:

“Dear God,” I begin, “Whatever we call you / Wherever we find you / in the laughter of our children / the tenderness of our parents / the strength of our brothers and sisters and friends / the closeness of our companions and husbands and wives. / In the arc of the pelican / the leap of the mullet, / the perfect sunny day / or incoming storm / In whatever ways we understand you, / in a church or synagogue or mosque, / or on a beach beneath a starry sky, / we offer gratitude for this day.”

Thanks, praise, gratitude – these are not just prayers, but a way of being – a way of being that can counter the Roah Ha-gezerah. Instead of allowing our hardships to define us, we turn instead toward the starry or sunlit sky and utter our heartfelt awe and appreciation for this undeserved gift of life.

Sometime ago, I came across a brilliant column by David Brooks of the New York Times called, “What Suffering Does.” He wrote this about people’s human response to loss: “The agony involved in say... having lost a loved one smashes through what they thought was the bottom floor of their personality, revealing an area below, and then it smashes through that floor revealing another area.”

In other words, loss, personal failure, hardship all push us down into darkness. Our emotions sink like an untethered elevator, crashing down and down, deeper and deeper, as we hurtle through the parts of our life that we can't control, confronting the very limits of our own human power. Brooks goes on to write:

It's at this point that people in the midst of difficulty begin to feel a call. They are not masters of the situation, but neither are they helpless. They can't determine the course of the pain, but they can participate in responding to it. ...Parents who've lost a child start foundations. ...Prisoners in the concentration camp with psychologist Viktor Frankl rededicated themselves to living up to the hopes and expectations of their loved ones, even though those loved ones might themselves already be dead. ...The right response to this sort of pain is not pleasure. It's holiness. ...It means seeing life as a moral drama ...and trying to redeem something bad by turning it into something sacred.

I have certainly seen this to be true among the families of our Solel community. After Sean Robins lost his battle with cancer as a young adult, his family started the Seany Foundation which now raises thousands of dollars for cancer research and runs a camp for children with cancer. After Keri Jucha nearly died from a brain infection as a young girl, she created her own charity which has donated laptops, DVD players, a home theater system, and more to Rady Children's Hospital, which performed her life-saving brain surgery. And there are many more such inspiring examples within our congregation. To again quote David Brooks: "Even while experiencing the worst and most lacerating consequences, some people double down on vulnerability. They hurl themselves deeper and gratefully into their ...loved ones and commitments."

Tzedakah, like Teshuvah and Tefillah, is healing. Tzedakah is in fact a worthy response to Roah Ha-gezerah – a holy response that turns us gradually back to life and people, and opens our hearts to be able to love and laugh again.

Our tradition teaches that Yom Kippur is intentionally designed to be a rehearsal for our own death. We fast because the dead don't eat. We wear white to remind us of the white linens in which Jews are buried. We open the Books of Life and Death in order to spend this day contemplating our mortality and human fragility. Today we are to ask, if we were to write our own eulogy right now, what would it say?

Would an honest eulogy say that we were stunted by our difficult life experiences, that abusive family members, or financial reversal, or death of a parent or child, or our own poor choices left us beyond human repair?

Or, might it say that Teshuvah helped us heal from these scarring traumatic experiences, that Tefillah helped us feel deep gratitude for the daily surprise of living, that Tzedakah helped us turn us back to life and gave us holy purpose?

The Roah Ha-gezerah, though difficult and painful and out of our control, does not have to define us. In the words of Viktor Frankl: “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

In these ways and more, our tradition gives us powerful tools to meet adversity, and then stand before our community like Simcha, and Lori, and Maya, and say, “Thank you.”

Thank you for the sweet breath of life entrusted to us in our Eitan; thank you for the opportunity to offer our best in serving him; and thank you for the strength to turn back to labor, and family, and community.

Thank you for the holy journey that is life.