

Kol Nidre Sermon 5769
Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills
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There are two moments in our lives when we have no choice: when we are born and when we die. The mysterious quirk of events that brings us into being, and the unknown moment of our death have baffled philosophers, theologians, and scientists alike. If birth and death are up to fate, if both are unknown, if our lives here are, as Maimonides put it, “an accident,” something that comes into being and lives for a while and then ceases to exist, then what is life’s purpose? How can we make anything of our *lives* – not just making something of *ourselves* through career, affiliations, or accolades? Then again, it may be precisely because we weren’t asked whether we wanted to come into the world, and again, won’t be asked when it’s time to go, that gives life its meaning. We’ve got this finite time together, and because we don’t know what it is about – we must make it meaningful. The mystery itself gives it meaning.

Let’s look at both of these moments. Ecclesiastes tells us that “The day of death is better than the day of birth.” Only after we have made life’s journey will we understand our place in the world and its history – when born there is only potential, when we pass away, all that we will achieve will have been achieved, and it is precisely that which needs to be celebrated.

There is a Midrash that describes two ships in a harbor: one leaving the port for a long journey, and the other returning from one. The first has spouses and children and friends and even passersby cheering the sailors – with their clean skin, clean shaves, and clean clothes – sending them off with fanfare, wishing them well in anticipation for what they may experience as they go off into the high seas. The second ship, the one entering the harbor, has made the journey, and no one even knows they’re coming in. And the sailors, weary, bearded, dirty and smelly, return in silence, no one waiting, no one cheering. They are the ones who deserve the fanfare, having returned successfully from a journey filled with squalls and fights, storms and pirates. And yet, it is only after they return to the docks, head home to their families, and make known the details, that the celebration can begin.

The same is true of our lives. What a party we have for our newborns; they are filled with all of the promises and hopes and dreams that we can carry for them. But their fates are still unknown. And many times it isn’t until one dies and we take the time to think about the impact they have had on our lives, do we begin to celebrate. I can tell you that I believe we as a community understand this more and more. Many times the first thing a family asks me to do for a memorial service is to make it less sad and more of a celebration. How fortunate some of us are, or will be, that we can celebrate what we have done and meant to people, while we are alive. And again, here come the doors of Judaism. Here is where you can find that appreciation of life; here is where you can celebrate and commemorate any of your life’s passages. In this community you can increase the meaning of the everyday.

But does the mystery of our departure from this world influence the decisions that we make daily? I'm not so sure. I'm not aware of any decisions that I have made that came with this idea – except for the occasional “you only live once.” Maybe I should do that more often; maybe that *one* thought could help me to make better decisions. But what about the first part, the chance of our birth?

We are who we are because that happened to all of us. What is Jewish tradition? The way those that came before us did it. What do we share? A common bond of the stories from our collective past.

When a Jewish boy or girl is born, or, for that matter, when anyone becomes a Jew, or connects themselves to the Jewish people – namely, each and every one of us here in this room – s/he inherits the history of all of our families. In ancient Israel, when a person brought the first fruits to the altar, he made a statement – not the Shema, not one praising God, not a prayer asking for anything from God. It's a statement of who the person is: “My father was a wandering Aramean, who went down to Egypt in meager numbers and became a great and populous nation” all the way to “God brought us to this place flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring my first fruits.” This is, by the way, the same phrase with which we begin the *maggid* – the story portion of our seder on Passover. That is our history - and that link, that story, is our precious gem, a unique bond between us. It can be very daunting – the responsibility of linking ourselves to this incredibly deep history – but it is played out one family at a time, one link at a time, one story at a time. Those Elul reflections represent the tip of the iceberg. Every one of our personal histories has an imprint on the history of all of us.

And we come into our personal family's history whether we want it or not. I have no choice about who my family is or when I was born, yet, indeed, I can't deny the impact it has had on the choices I make every single day of my life. Who our parents are, or who they were, had a direct influence on who we are today – where we grew up, who our friends were, where we went to school (or even if we went to school), what our religious ideas are, how we relate to other people, who we choose as our spouse, what kind of parent we are, our values, pretty much everything.

At the first meeting of every Bar or Bat Mitzvah, we spend a lot of time talking about a person's Hebrew name. Imagine that our Hebrew names are our first names, and our parents' first names. I am Yonatan ben Rachmiel u'Miriamna (Jonathan, the son of Ronald and Marianne). Our name spells out our parents' influence. This person is specifically the child of these two people, and if you know the parents, it doesn't mean that you know the child, but you certainly can understand that child a little better. Think of all the people you who were greatly influenced by their parents' occupations or passions. You know, lawyers beget lawyers, doctors beget doctors, artists... artists, athletes... athletes, and rabbis beget rabbis. And yet, the other is true, too; many children say, “I'll never do what my parents did,” which, of course, has the same amount of influential impact.

Is it fair that someone else has that much influence on me? Shouldn't I be able to freely choose what I want to do in my life? Of course, in so many respects we are free to choose. But then again, should we just ignore history, should we just blow off the fact that our personal existence on earth is completely dependent upon exact moments and histories of generations that came before us, and not realize the influence of who we are in relation to our relations, and what it means to be a part of our particular family?

There have been many times in the last twelve years as a rabbi in this congregation when I questioned why I do what I do. I'm sure that I'm not the only one in this room to do that. (I don't mean that you questioned why I'm doing it.) I called those moments of questioning my "existential angst," and the feeling would pass until the next time. It took a story that I read about my grandfather late in the summer to give me a clear perspective about who I am.

This past summer, my mother's brother, Samuel Adler, was giving a lecture in Maine. My uncle Sam is a composer of contemporary music. He spent twelve years as the musical director at Temple Emanuel in Dallas, but lived most of his professional life as the chair of the composition department at Eastman School of Music. Since 1977 he has been on the faculty at Julliard School of Music in New York and traveling around the world conducting and premiering his music. He's coming here as an artist-in-residence for the first Shabbat in March, which will be an amazing weekend.

Anyway, after his talk, a woman came up to him, and told him that she was from Worcester, Massachusetts, where he grew up from the age of eleven. She said that they both went to the same temple, Temple Emanuel. Her sister had recently taken a course in writing memoirs, and she thought he might be interested in one of the chapters. He graciously said *yes*, and when he received the eight-page, single-spaced document, he did read it, sent it to my mother, who, in turn, sent it to me. I sat down and looked through the words of a woman that I never met, and would probably never know. Afterward, with tears streaming down my cheeks, I understood.

This is my Bar-Mitzvah High Holy Days, the thirteenth time I've stood in front of you in this white robe, and I haven't talked about my family background very much. My family is deeply linked to Germany and the Holocaust. My mother, along with her family, emigrated from Germany one month after Kristallnacht in 1938. My grandfather, Hugo Ch. Adler, was the cantor at the main synagogue in Manheim, Germany – the senior of five cantors in the congregation. Incidentally, when one talks about the strange quirk of events that leads to one's existence, consider this: my Opa's parents lived one year in Antwerp, Belgium, and it was during that year that Hugo was born. Because of that, my mother and her family were able to leave Germany and come to America on the Belgian quota. If he had been born in Germany, someone else is delivering this sermon today. Within a year after arriving in New York City, he received a call asking if he would be willing to be the cantor at a Reform congregation in Worcester. The synagogue in Manheim was traditional – although they did have a mixed choir and organ – and so they asked him if he had a problem with Reform Judaism. He was reported to have said, "Judaism is Judaism." And so they moved to Worcester, and Temple Emanuel.

There is a story told that on his first High Holy Days there, he went to a traditional shul for the second day of Rosh Hashanah (because there was no second day at the reform temple), and he overheard someone say, “There’s the goyisha cantor from Emanuel.” He never stepped foot in a traditional congregation again. There’s another tale about my Oma on that first High Holy Days. The president of the sisterhood called her up and asked her to make the gefilte fish for the breakfast. She replied “What’s gefilte fish?” In Germany they ate karp. The woman hung up the phone and called her friend: “The new cantor’s wife never heard of gefilte fish; I don’t think she’s Jewish!”

During my senior year in high school, and my freshman year of college, I worked in the religious school at Emanuel as the songleader. I can still picture his portrait hanging in the clergy suite, and I remember going up and touching his bronze plaque at the entrance to the sanctuary. I can still feel the feeling I had when I would lead services with the children on the same bimah where he sang Kol Nidre. I never met him; he died in 1955 after battling cancer and having one of his legs amputated. My mother said he never once complained about his illness. His death was one year before my brother David was born, who is, incidentally, a rabbi and professor of biblical studies at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Just to round out the picture, my other brother, Richard, teaches cello at the University of Michigan and Juilliard. Judaism and Music. When we were kids, we heard stories about our Opa Hugo, how he knew the trope to the Torah by heart, and could correct B’nai Mitzvah students’ mistakes while editing his music. How he was a gifted musician and singer, and his choirs were legendary. People used to come up to me while I worked there to tell me how much influence he had on them, but, you know, I was like seventeen or eighteen years old at that time. I smiled and said *thank you*, felt proud, but I don’t think it sunk in.

The woman who wrote the memoir is named Ethel Sadowsky. The chapter is really about her experience with the immigrants from Germany who settled in Worcester. On the third page, a paragraph begins, “Our closest connection with an adult refugee began in fifth grade when we started Hebrew class on Thursday afternoons. Our teacher was Cantor Adler. . . The cantor wasn’t very tall, a bit paunchy, with a round face and steel-rimmed glasses. He was mostly bald, although a fringe of gray/black hair encircled his head.” All right, I got the bald part from him, but I’m taller, and not as paunchy, yet. She said that he insisted on their pronouncing the sound “ch” correctly. “All of you say ‘ach,’” he would implore them, and she claimed that his teaching did get her to pronounce the Hebrew better. He invited them to be in his choir. She writes that he said, “Zis iz a great honor, to zing in a choir, zere is nussing more beautiful.” He sent letters home to their parents, signed *Hugo Ch. Adler*. They mused as to what the middle initials “ch” stood for. Was it Charles, Chester, Chauncey, Chip, or Cheech? Ethel didn’t join his choir.

She picks it up about a dozen years later. She’s married and pregnant and her husband was about to enter his fourth year of medical school, and they were to spend two months in London. As they were looking for a flat to rent, they entered the house of an older woman named Mrs. Altmann. They liked the flat, and told her they would take it for two

months. Mrs. Altmann said that she wanted only people who could rent for one year. As they were leaving, Ethel noticed a book of music on the upright piano. The title was in German, and the composer was Hugo Ch. Adler. “That’s Cantor Adler!” she said to the woman, “You have heard of Cantor Adler?” “Yes, I knew him well. He taught me Hebrew, and he prepared Norman for his Bar Mitzvah. He died last year.”

This was Mrs. Altmann’s response: “Ah, yes, I know. A great loss. A great loss. Hugo Adler was a musical genius. My husband, may he rest in peace, was his colleague. But no one was as great as Adler. And you knew him? How wonderful! You must tell me about his life in America.” Needless to say, Ethel and Norman got the flat for two months. And in the mornings, Mrs. Altmann would come upstairs with a pot of tea and have Ethel tell her stories of my Opa.

That was 1956, fifty-two years ago. Two women, one from a small working town in New England, and one from London, England, connected to each other through Hugo Ch. Adler, my Opa. I read that story, and I understand why I’m standing here today. I understand why I’m connected with Yonah, who brings the music to the bimah. I understand why my life is filled with music and Judaism. This is my story; this is my history; this is who I am. And on that day in London, my story was shared by Ethel and Mrs. Altmann, and it wasn’t even mine yet.

We do not know why we were born into our families, and we don’t know when our time will be over. But we are our own personal pasts, and the pasts of our parents, and the pasts of our grandparents, and great-grandparents, and we are the collective pasts of all Jews. That story I told is yours, too. The wandering Aramean is your father as well. It is all part of the tapestry of our Judaism; it is all a part of the whole. And when it is our time to go from here, our story will become the past of the next generation. Perhaps we can think of it this way: The doors we open can lead us to the future or link us to the past, or both. I think that lately a lot of us have spent time looking outside of ourselves and our Jewish connections to define who we are, when if we would just look within, look at our relation to those who came before us, we might gain the insight and understanding about our connection, about our stories, about who we are. Think about your stories, tell them to each other, join them to the collective stories of all of us.

And by the way, that “ch” in Hugo Ch. Adler, was *chayim*, a name he gave himself when his life began again in our great country. L’chayim, to life.