

Yom Kippur Sermon 5768
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Not long ago in the *New York Times* there was an article headlined: “Ten Things To Do Before This Article Is Finished.” It gently poked fun at the contemporary trend of making what is called a “life list.” Evidence of the popularity of these lists is all around: The paperback *1,000 Places to See Before You Die* is a best seller; it is even a TV show, produced by our congregant Scott Stone. Visa is running a print campaign around a checklist called “Things to Do When You’re Alive.” One version of it includes: “Walk the red carpet at a movie premier, visit an active volcano, master Japanese cooking, and discover a planet.” There is even a website inviting people to share their lists.

Why are these lists so popular? One theory is that the lists are the “perfect way for ambitious, time-crunched professionals to embark on spiritual quests in a productivity obsessed age.” What could be better than discovering the meaning of life in a simple list?

The articles cite a bunch of experts. One explained that the primary audience for these lists are people who have lived long enough to understand that life has no dress rehearsal. This is it!

There was a wonderful cartoon in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*. A man, sitting in a Chinese restaurant, opens a fortune cookie and reads it to his companion. It says: “You will die someday.” It made me laugh out loud. Weird sense of humor, you might think. But, really, this is the only fortune that will actually come true for everyone. You will die someday. This is not a dress rehearsal.

This is what Yom Kippur is all about. Make sure you create meaning out of the time you have.

Yom Kippur is a symbolic confrontation with death. We don’t eat, we don’t drink, we don’t wash, we don’t wear leather shoes (a sign of comfort), and we don’t have sex. We don’t do the things that living people do. In Biblical times, Yom Kippur was marked by dramatic... and traumatic... communal sacrifices. The High Priest, after weeks of rigorous preparations, atones for the people by slaughtering large animals and sprinkling their blood around the altar. It must have been powerful and horrifying at the same time to be so close to death. One minute, the animal was alive, its heart beating in terror. The next minute...it was dead... killed in atonement for our sins. In the Rashi group, when we studied the chapters in Leviticus that describe these sacrifices, one of the men in the class said: “I’ll tell you this, rabbi ... if you did that on Yom Kippur, it would really get my attention.”

You will die someday. Does that get your attention? If there ever were a day when you should pay attention to what is on your life list, Yom Kippur is the day. That’s why Rabbi Aaron and I have framed all of our teachings for these High Holy Days around one of those lists, attributed to the 4th century Babylonia sage Rava.

Rava said: At the hour when they bring a person in for judgment, they ask him/her:

1. Did you conduct your business affairs faithfully?
2. Did you set aside time to study Torah?
3. Were you concerned about the future?
4. Did you look forward to salvation?
5. Did you debate wisely?

And even so, if "the fear of God was your treasure" – yes, if not – no.

(BT Shabbat 31a)

This life list is not exactly in the same universe as the Visa list. "Did you conduct your business affairs faithfully?" is rather a different way to judge the meaning of your life than "Spend a weekend in Las Vegas like a high roller."

So what is on your list? How do you want to be judged? What lists actually matter, the lists you make or the lists you are on?

I'm sure many of you saw the *Newsweek* story on the 50 most influential rabbis in America. I didn't make the list. I must admit, I was disappointed. It felt like a judgment about my career, my worth as a rabbi. It's true that many other talented and skilled rabbis also didn't make the list. But I was disappointed nonetheless. It was such a public judgment. It took a while for me to recognize that the criteria of that list were not actually the criteria by which I would hope to be measured. It gave points for notoriety, media mentions, and size of constituency. It didn't give points for spirituality, or activism, being present at important moments in people's lives, or communicating the meaning and joy of Jewish life.

Still, it's a little frightening to see how easy it is to get it wrong, to want to be on a list that ultimately doesn't reflect the values I hold as important. That list was more about vanity than values, more about celebrity than about the celebration of life. My reaction pointed out to me that I have some work to do this Yom Kippur, about clarifying what is really important, and about understanding how I want to be measured and by whom. After all, who is actually our judge?

Who is the judge? The last line of Rava's list suggests that God is the judge. "...if 'the fear of God was your treasure' – yes, if not – no." (BT Shabbat 31a) In other words, the measure of your life has to do with how you stand before God.

I suspect that few of us are actually comfortable with the idea of God as judge. We don't want to be judged by anyone, least of all by the projection of our deepest true Self. And yet this image permeates our prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. And the idea that when we die, we will be held accountable for all the choices we made, whether they enhanced life or diminished it... this idea is both powerful and horrifying, like those animal sacrifices. The "fear of God the Judge" does seem to be an important dimension of these holy days because it taps into primal fears that we all have: Fear of being judged and coming up short, fear of being seen as an imposter, fear of knowing the lists that really matter to us, because

then we will have to change our lives to live up to them. Without this fear, our lists would just be like the Visa list, focused only on pleasure and adventure, not about values that matter.

Still, I think that Rava was talking about a different kind of fear. While there are lots of different words for fear in Hebrew, the two that most commonly appear in our High Holy Day liturgy are *Pachad* and *Yirah*. *Pachad* is the kind of fear you feel when something terrible happens like when the earth begins to tremble and all your dishes come crashing down off the shelves. *Yirah* is different: it means awe, reverence or perhaps wonder. The High Holy Days are called *Yomim Noraim*, from the root *Yirah*... and we translate them as “The Days of Awe.” Awe is quite different than fear.

Both kinds of fear are part of our Yom Kippur experience, aren't they? There is terror, when we recite the words of *U'netah tokef*: “Who shall live and who shall die... who by water and who by fire...” There is terror in actually admitting that so much of our lives is out of our control. Some of us will get cancer this year, some of us will be in automobile accidents, some of us will die. No wonder that we are afraid.

But too many of us get stuck in “the terror of God.” Too many of us take the words of our prayer book literally, believing that God is not only judge, but also the executioner; and since we know we are not perfect...that we don't live up to the standards by which we think we ought to be judged... we feel a terror that keeps us from experiencing the other meaning of the High Holy Days.

The word for “fear” Rava's uses is not the one that means terror. It is the one that means “awe.” The real message of Yom Kippur is *Yirat Hashem*... awe in the face of the mysteries of life which surround us.

My colleague Rabbi Seger suggests that a teaching of the great Hasidic Rabbi, Nachman of Bratslav, can help us get that message right. “*Kol Ha-Olam Kulo, Geshet Tzar Me'od, Ve-ha-ikar lo Lefachaid Klal*: The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is not be afraid.” The main thing is not to be blinded by fear...not to believe we are being judged and being punished. God doesn't judge in that way.

Yes, Yom Kippur reminds us that our lives are vulnerable... we do walk on a narrow, fragile pretty shaky bridge. At any moment, we could fall or the bridge could crumble. But if all we focus on is the fear...our fear might get in the way of our seeing clearly what is most important. The fear that we could disappear at any moment might be part of what confuses us and leads us to want to be on lists that ultimately don't really matter. Or maybe part of the reason we make lists... “to do” lists or even life lists... is the fantasy that until we finish everything on our list, we can't possibly die.

This actually became clear to me when I spent a week at a silent retreat, cut off from my cell phone and palm pilot. The silence was very hard for me, but being so cut off from my obligations was terrifying: I felt invisible, as though I had disappeared. The truth that the world will continue after I am gone was paralyzing. As soon as I returned and the busyness of my life returned... all those phone calls to return, all those e-mails... all those mostly

unimportant emergencies... I was again able to deny the terror of the fragility of my life. But that denial gets in the way of seeing what is really important.

We need to admit that yes, we do live on a narrow bridge, and yes, we will die. And yes, it is up to us to figure out how to make meaning out of lives that will end...But discovering real meaning doesn't come out of terror. Terror is enslaving. We need to "Lo lefachad klal"... not be terrified at all. If we are not afraid, we can live in the moment... not measure our lives based on some list of experiences yet to happen. Not that we can't do wonderful and exciting things, but that we shouldn't measure ourselves against them. They enhance our lives, perhaps, but they are not the measure of our lives. And if we overcome terror, we can be present to the moment, we can experience *Yirah*: awe...at the wondrous gift of being alive. It is *Yirah* that teaches us that every breath we breathe is a gift...whether we are in Las Vegas, Matchupicho or sitting at our kitchen tables with a cup of tea.

Yirah is redemptive. We appreciate the narrow bridge; we understand that we make meaning in our lives by the choices we make in whatever time we have. *Yirat adonai*, the awe of the divinity that is all around us, is what can help us ask the right questions... determine the right measure of our lives. *Yirah* affirms life... which is why we find in the Talmud the following teaching: "After Yom Kippur one should feel as if one had been created anew: The Holy One said to them, since you came before Me for judgment and emerged successfully, I look upon you as if you had been created anew." (Talmud Yerushalmi, Rosh Hashana 4:8).

And this, I think, is the one way the Visa list gets it right. They title it: "Things To Do While You're Alive." The point of Yom Kippur, of this near death experience, is to come out of it feeling more alive, and more clear about making your life matter.

In a new movie called "The Shadow of the Moon," astronauts, now men in their seventies, who were involved with the Apollo missions to the moon, reflect on their experiences. They were asked whether they were afraid... by the isolation, by being so far from the Earth, by the fragility of their situation. But they spoke instead of being exhilarated by seeing the world... their world... from an entirely new perspective. One describes very simply what it was like to see the moon, the earth and the sun at the same time from his window in the space module. "Suddenly I realized that I am made of molecules imprinted from the beginning of time, the same molecules that constitute this spacecraft, and the other astronauts, and the fragile, beautiful earth just floating out there in space. And I am connected to it all, a part of all of this beauty. What a gift it is to be alive. And how petty do all those squabbles on earth seem from this distance."

That is *yirah*, the breathless recognition of the extraordinary gift of life that puts us in touch with a sense of connection, an understanding that we are all part of the same whole... the whole that is God.

Maybe that kind of trip to the moon ought to be on all of our life lists. Or at least an experience that opens our eyes and hearts to that insight. We have each had those moments: the birth of a child, a brush with danger, a walk through a forest, a feeling of connection to every other living being that dwarfs our own ego.

Yom Kippur is one of those moments. We are looking out of the window of that spacecraft – and we see that everything is One, everything is connected. So in answer to Rava’s questions: Since I am connected to every other living being, of course I will conduct my business affairs honestly...otherwise I am cheating myself; of course I will study Torah, my tradition’s spiritual path that leads me to this Oneness; of course I will care about the future, work for repairing the world, and be careful that my words don’t hurt other people. How could I do otherwise... if I live my life with the awareness that it is all a gift.

We know Rava’s questions. What are yours? “At the hour they bring you in for judgment, they will ask you: what is on your list?” That hour is now.

May Yom Kippur give you the clarity to measure yourself by a list that reflects the awe of God.