

This is my sermon before Yizkor. It's always a difficult moment. We are sitting here contemplating nothing less than life and death...those whom we loved and our own. Typically, I have used this time to help comfort and help bring hope. This year is different. It's different because of who is not here.

Recently I have gotten to know a man in the community whose young daughter died. He and his wife won't come to these services. Over the years I have met others who have experienced traumatic loss. And share this difficulty.

This is a day of very hard truths. This is a day when we remember the past; we try to confront ourselves honestly. On this day we recall the memory of those whom we loved and on this day we consider our own lives and our own destiny.

The liturgy, the words help us do this. And yet, we know as much as we read words, there is a part of what goes on here that is very old and creates conflict. There is the specific language which often differs from the emotional response and the perceived message.

I am sure many of you also know, families that have difficulties being in synagogue on these days.

In an article by Rabbi Harold Schulweis he quoted a letter from a congregant named Lillian. She wrote it between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur one year and she wrote the following. "I write to you as both my friend and rabbi driven by the deep sadness and sense of disconnectedness that has gripped me since Rosh Hashanah. Until this morning, I knew the central liturgy of the holiday well, but before this year I had only approached it in abstract intellectual manner. This year I couldn't do so. Several months ago I had surgery for cancer. I felt very keenly as I approached these days that in a real sense my fate for the coming year has been written. It is in the Book of Judgment and in my own body. I look forward to health, but it may not be granted. As I read the central questions of the service, with which we are familiar...How many shall pass away, and how many will be born. Who shall live and who shall die. You know the words and then we add *t'shuva*, *tefillah*, *u'tzeddaka*, repentance, prayer and righteousness avert the severe decree. For the first time it carried a terrifying implication. It seemed to me as I read this that my own liturgy was binding my fate to my behavior, that my illness seen in this light has been the result of some terrible unknown transgression. That ultimately punishment for failure to discover and correct it would be my death. I do not believe this, neither with my head nor with my heart. Nevertheless, as a committed Jew that takes language very seriously and believes in community prayer, I'm forced to repeat this central cornerstone over and over again. Should I attend services on Yom Kippur? It seems to me today that my choice is a terrible one, to flagellate myself emotionally by joining my congregation or to spare my feelings by isolating myself from family, friends and community. It is a choice I never believed I would have to make. I know there are others in our congregation who sit suffering silently as I did today who wished to join Jews

around the world, but find the price too high to pay. I do not expect an easy answer. Holocaust literature taught me that there maybe no answer at all. I write instead because I must attempt to muffle my sadness and my anger or it will destroy something in the commitment that I have worked so hard to build. I write from pain hoping that from the expression of my dilemma will grow some insight in some way to cope.”

As I look out on this day I can say that we know that there are times when religion is truly about matters of life and death. There are times when religion is not about getting the right seat in the sanctuary on High Holy Days or having your Bar Mitzvah scheduled on the perfect Saturday or making sure the synagogue and caterer are available for the wedding. There are times when religion, God, faith, prayer is truly taken to heart. When religion is about life and death we pray differently and we think differently. When we wish each other *L’shanah Tovah Tiketevu*, to be written for a good year, *L’shanah Tovah Tichateimu*, that you should be sealed for a good year, we are cutting through the subtleties of theology into the hard core of existence.

The profound concern of the families that couldn’t come here and the letter from Shulweis’ article don’t let me go. And I need to continue.

He shared this letter. “Rabbi don’t lie to me. I have a fatal form of cancer and I am dying. The doctors have been frank with me. I have two small children who go to your school. I love them and they love me. I have wonderful parents and a marvelously supportive husband. But I cannot make sense of it all. I don’t ask why me, but what for? Life for me has been drained of meaning. What do I have with these remaining weeks or month to live for? My children have given me so much meaning. I look forward to being their mother, but I know now that I won’t be able to raise them. My future has been cut off. The woman explained that when she was in the hospital a rabbi came to blow Shofar for her. He inquired into the nature of illness and asked whether she lit Shabbat candles. When she told him that he did, he said you have nothing to worry about.”

It reminds me of the story of the rabbis in Israel who after a train crashed into a school bus announced that the families of the children did not have their mezzuzot checked.

A few years ago I visited a man in the hospital who was 96. He informed me that it was the first time in his entire life that he had been hospitalized. He also told me he was dying of bone cancer. He then asked me: “Rabbi, why am I being punished?”

Somehow and from some deep place in our being, most of us live with this painful, horrific notion that illness is about reward and punishment and if we are good we will live, perhaps live forever and if we are sick, we did something, so God is either testing or punishing us.

This notion which can be read into liturgy is found throughout popular culture and something when we learned when we were little children. I believe it’s a notion that we

must confront squarely and discard. It's a notion that we have to transcend. It's about entering a deeper level of spiritual maturity.

To make matters worse, this idea has also been abused by popular culture. We don't control everything! We can't. It's not the nature of the life we live and yet...we consistently are made to feel as if we can or should.

I know you know the work of Dr. Bernie Siegel. In his book "Lessons Learned About Self-Healing" from a doctor's experience with exceptional patients. Siegel writes bits about statistics, evidence, anecdotal accounts of patients who successfully cope with death threatening diseases and beat the odds. They are resilient, adaptable, and confident with an unquenchable will to live. They defy the prognostications of doctors, because they refuse to curl up and die. I'm not a doctor. But my experience with the sick and terminally ill tell me that Siegel may be doing most people a terrible injustice.

Do you recall the book written over a decade ago by Norman Cousins, "The Anatomy of an Illness." He wrote patients divide themselves into two groups. Those who were confident they would beat back the disease and are able to resume normal lives and those who resign themselves to prolong, even fatal illnesses. Those who have optimistic views have a higher percentage of being discharged as cured, then the others. There appears to be, according to Norman Cousins, a physiology of optimism. There are peptide molecules in the body releasing wonder drugs within and dauphins, interleukins, interferon's. Bernie Siegel wrote, instead of turning fighters into victims, we should be turning victims into fighters. These books are sprinkled with success stories of exceptional patients whose attitude will give them hope and extend their lives.

In our culture we have people drinking ungodly amounts of berry juices and pomegranate juice and believing that you will be well if you just run enough or reduce your calories and fat intake enough, stay out of the sun long enough, meditate enough, and laugh enough, whatever. And so we see that from both early sources and the most modern sources, we are fed a diet that we have control of our own destiny. Be good, do good, eat good, act good and all will be well.

Sometimes it works and that's good. But you know what? Often it doesn't. And when it doesn't, the results are devastating...they erode our very souls and spirits. And we become the victims, not only of our misfortune, but also the evil that goes with the blame. You must have done something to deserve that...that's the attitude and that attitude is tragic and, yes, evil. It's like the consolers of Job, who don't really console at all...rather are relieved it's him and not them and wonder what did he possibly did to deserve his misfortune.

Psychological literature speaks about survivor's guilt. Those tortured by their good fortune to survive while others fall. Soldiers who see their buddies wounded and killed while they leave the battlefield unscarred. Survivors of concentration camps who witnessed the suffering and the murder of their fellow inmates while they are spared. BUT, today people suffer from victim's guilt. The guilt of failure, the ordinary, unlucky

condemned. So the results are that we have difficulty forgiving ourselves, because we are unexceptional. Bernie Siegel goes so far as to write, "Illness doesn't strike randomly like a thief in the night. Certain kinds of people, at certain points in their lives will come down with certain ailments, you can almost predict it."

I know all of us can understand his argument that patients become too acquiescent, too passive, and too dependent and therefore abandon their responsibility. All of us know that there are things that we can do to help us remain healthier and more alive. We know that there is a mind body apparatus at work.

But there is a danger in all this. Schulweis refers to it as the tyranny of the will. We are mistakenly raised to believe in the omnipotence of our will. We have read to in our childhood and we pass it on as theology to our own children. We are the little engine who chugs its way up the mountain with the endless refrain, I think I can, I think I can, I think I can, I think I can, until triumph finally flashes and then we say I knew I could, I knew I could, I knew I could.

We live in this popular culture of will and wish. You remember Peter Pan; he reached out to the audience to have it pray with its hands to revive Tinker Bell. So, we have a culture that faith can revive and faith can resurrect and faith can redeem and faith can cure, if only. If only you believe enough in yourself and if you believe enough in your recovery. And so we make ourselves sick and we make ourselves well.

But it doesn't always work. Good people, wonderful people, tzaddikim get sick and die. We all do. And blaming nature or misfortune on our behavior adds horrific insult to the injury.

There was a popular psychologist who convinced his audiences that with their cooperation he could convert their sadness to happiness. He would instruct his audience to smile and when they parted their lips and showed their teeth he challenged them to be simultaneously sad. When you smile, he concluded, you control your emotions. Smiling makes you happy.

Photographers have developed this philosophy into a technique. Look happy rabbi, they say to me. Stop eating, stand behind the other seated guests. I may not look happy because at that moment I may not be happy. Smiling is not an appropriate expression at this moment. Say cheese, the photographer advises. I will obey and later the photographer boasts that he captured my happiness. In truth, however, the photographer did not moralize happiness at all, but rather captured the cheese.

This is a day to confront truth and realities, not to make us depressed, but to help us with it, existential realities...

The triumph of the will ignores the wisdom that understands. I can will my smile, but I can't merely will my happiness. I can will my eating, but I can't will my hunger. I can will going to sleep, but I can't will my dreams. I can will knowledge, but I cannot will

wisdom. I can will self-assertion, but I cannot my courage. I can will shaving; combing, dressing up, but I cannot will my joy. I can will purchasing flowers, perfume, candies, but I cannot will love. I can will fasting, the recitation of all of my transgression, but I cannot will remorse. I can will open the prayer book and the Bible, but I cannot will belief. Schulweis continued that in HIS illness, he sat down at night and he turned to a channel which fortuitously was showing "A Night at the Opera," the Marks Brothers classic. Norman Cousins counsel didn't work with him, he said, he couldn't laugh. The Marks Brothers at that moment weren't funny, nothing was funny. He had received a serious diagnosis. Should he be considered a failure because he wasn't able to laugh? Fortunately, we have places to turn.

What does our tradition say about all this? You know Judaism does celebrate freedom of choice and freedom of will. From the time of the Bible we have struggled against predestination theologies and against fate, but there is a deep wisdom in Judaism. A reality principle that knows that there is a limitation to will. Judaism presents a more balanced portrayal of the human condition. There is a time to be born and a time to die. That helps us understand a little bit differently who shall live and who shall die. In fact, we cannot will eternal life. Who shall pass away and who shall be born, who shall perish by fire and who by water, who by earthquake and who by plague. I don't know and you don't know. These matters are not matters of will, not my will, or your will, nor in fact God's will. They are natural events, births, deaths, accidents, sicknesses in which we have little control. They cannot all be seen as God's punishments or rewards. What then are they if they are not acts of God? Are they the acts of the devil?

Over and again, in my studies over the last few years I have come to a section from the Talmud, from Avoda Zara, that refers to the following. *Olam K'minhago nohaig*, the world of nature pursues its natural course. The Talmud uses an expression in arguing against the simplistic explanation of natural events. NATURE IS NOT MORAL, NOT IMMORAL; IT'S AMORAL. The Sages ask, suppose a man stole a measure of wheat and then he sowed in the ground. Wouldn't it be right that the wheat would not grow? That would deem, that would be God's judgment expressed by the rabbinic courts. But the rabbis say the world pursues its own course and for fools who act wrongly, those who stole the wheat, they are going to have render and account.

They say the world pursues its natural course. "As far as transgressors who act wrongly, someday, some place they will render an account." What the rabbis did is that they caution us not to confuse biology with morality. Not to confuse nature with the process of law. Not to confuse the physical laws of nature with the moral laws. Every event may have a cause, but not every event is morally determined. If you drive out into the street and are hit by a reckless driver, it's not necessarily because you did something wrong.

Not every event has a purpose. Cancers of the skin are not curses for sin. Heart attacks are not God's punishment. No, aging and dying is not God's way of saying that you have done wrong.

That's not to say that there aren't consequences for actions or reasons that explain why sicknesses are caused. Nature is not God. It might be a manifestation of God's creative

power. But it shouldn't be confused with moral judgment. An earthquake, a hurricane that destroys people should not be turned into God's anger. That outlook breeds a spirit a paganism that finds ghosts in rocks and waters and lesions in the skin. That theology turns sadomasochistic. We continuously beat ourselves up. It turns God into a sadistic God and turns people into masochists with a taste for suffering.

Another well-known Talmudic story tells of a boy who climbs a ladder to shoo away a mother bird so she doesn't see the fledgling being taken. It is a response to a commandment in the Torah, a response that is meant to inculcate human sensitivity to all of life. The boy in the story falls off the ladder when performing a mitzvah, a mitzvah which brings with it a promise of long life. The boy dies and the father loses his faith forever. What's the rabbi's response? The rabbis are so deeply troubled. It troubling that the good behavior does not lead to reward, but rather punishment. They question God's fairness. They question God's role in the everyday business of life. They understand that sometimes it is the rickety ladder that was placed on the tree and it wasn't about God at all.

We are imperfect and life is imperfect. And we can say, we are blessed with these imperfect lives. Our lives are a short period of time between two eternities. The problem may be that human life is too filled with the need to find fault. It is as if we can't explain any event without it being the fault of somebody. So how remarkable it was that two thousand years ago the rabbis said nature pursues its own course. When Bernie Siegel contends that all diseases ultimately related to a lack of love. He unintentionally adds insult to injury because there are so many people who are ill, who feel deeply loved and are able to love, people who do good, people who may be involved in religious life; people contribute their time to help others, people with social conscious, good people. Bernie Siegel's work results in a secular guilt trip.

So, we return to the letter in the very beginning and the grief of our friends complicated by simplistic answers. How do we say *Unetaneh Tokef*? Louis Jacobs wrote, "While its popularity has been attested to throughout the ages, it cannot be denied that if it is taken too literally the prayer can be offensive to modern taste." Particularly the suggestion that repentance, prayer and charity are a means of averting the Divine threat of a horrible death. The problem of pain, the mystery of why the evil exists is one that exercised the mind of the greatest religious thinkers. Though solutions have been offered, but when all is said we have to confess defeat. We have to recognize that we don't have ultimate control, in fact often, very little control. We live in the presence of the unfathomable. That this finite mind of man cannot hope to penetrate the secrets of the infinite. Our faith insists on the belief of the goodness of God. My faith insists on the goodness of God. And yet there are IMPERFECTIONS in life in which there is no control. Nature does have its normal course. And that's what *Unetaneh Tokef* is saying.

There are not immoral but amoral features in the world of nature. The withering of the leaves, the breaking of the boughs, miscarriages and birth, congenital and non-congenital diseases. Nature places limitations on all of us.

Perhaps that's why the rabbis taught us not to pray for things which are impossible, to change the course of nature, for that can't be done. It is referred to as a tefillat shav, a vane empty prayer.

Our faith is not magic. As much as I would like to, none of us can pray away the impact that aging has on our hearts and our minds and bodies. The wisdom of acceptance, however, is not the acceptance of impotence, but rather the reality of life's pain, the reality of disease, the reality of aging, and the reality of dying. It is not meant to paralyze the proper functioning of mind, heart and will. That's the meaning of t'shuvah, tefillah and tzeddaka. Those are the areas that I do have control. The nature of the outside, the world of nature I can only respect and observe, I can affect the world inside. I can affect my spiritual life and I can affect my life as it is lived with others. I can return to goodness, I can pray, I can help the world around me.

A well-known collection known as the "Ikkarim" Alboe says my prayer actions don't change God, but they change me. Maimonides offered a crucial distinction between healing of the body and healing of the soul. He cursed as folly people who read a scriptural verse or place a Torah or a pair of tefillin on a child so that he may sleep...a custom of his time. "This is the way of divination and fortune tellers," he said, "but it uproots the Torah." For they who practice this manner make the Torah the healer of the body as it is meant to be a healer of the spirit. It's not God's will. When we are sick and when we suffer we can teach people how to love, how to cling to faith, how to continue to hope. When we live we teach and when we die we also teach. We can teach dignity, we can teach courage, we can teach meaning.

As we sit about to enter Yizkor, we remember those who gave us life, we remember our loved ones and remember what they taught us. We don't blame them for leaving us. Nor can we blame ourselves. We have to believe that they all did the best they could.

And think of them *l'tovah*. As we sit here on Yizkor, we are reminded of imperfection. We are reminded that life is not eternal. That we too will go the way of all humanity, so we are forced to ask ourselves how it is we want to live our lives. If we think we can control it all we leave the realm of the human and we become failures. We don't. Sometimes we must live in this universe with acceptance. And in the acceptance we can find our God and we can find peace. What are the values we want to teach? Returning to others and God, prayer, and goodness...That's the true meaning of *Unetaneh Tokef*...We can make meaningful lives in spite of what we face. When return to our truth, we return to our people. When we return to community and we share our lives with others, when we feel the existence of God, when we give of ourselves, then life with all of its inescapable pain can become a bit more bearable.

We hope, we pray for a good year, for a healthy year. Standing before this powerful truth we are humbled. In our humility at this moment we embrace memory and we join others who also suffer pain and loss. And we embrace each other. With that humility we see ourselves as a part of something much bigger than any one of us. We look to each other for strength and we pray to God for comfort.

We turn now to the Yizkor service.