

**How Did You Spend Your Marbles?:
Your "Blank Page" Will Tell the Story
Erev Yom Kippur 5782**

This past year, since last Yom Kippur, and before has been a year unlike any other. To be sure every one of us was affected in different ways by the covid-19 pandemic. But for me personally, it was a year like no other. More than ever on a personal level, I had to deal with the most existential of all questions. In the face of death, what really matters?

First my Mom came close to her demise, having spent a week in hospice after her doctor told us she had at most 48 hours to live. Thank God, miraculously, she pulled through and completely recovered from multiple complications, which under any other circumstances, would have robbed her of her life.

Then on the heels of her recovery, I contracted covid-19, and after a week of horrific pain and suffering, landed in the hospital for 8 days

living on the precipice of life and death, as my oxygen levels dropped to dangerous levels.

And then just months later, I travelled to Annapolis, to see my Father for the last time before he passed away leaving me to mourn the loss of my Abba. Then within the same month, my Rabbi for over 50 years, Rabbi Henry Cohen passed into Eternity at the age of 93.

Faced with so much travail in such a short space of time, I have naturally come to scrutinize what is life all about anyway. Yes, I have philosophically and intellectually addressed these issues in the past from the bima, but now it was all too real. Coming face to face with one's own mortality and the fragile nature of life itself in the most intimate of ways, certainly causes you to reflect in ways you never pondered before.

This evening allow me to share some of the takeaways, the gut-wrenching realizations that are borne of personal experience with death and dying. For those who have walked this path before me, I hope some of this will resonate and for those who have not, I hope

you will benefit from my reflections on the question of what it means to live a life worth remembering.

In fact, there is no better day than today, Yom Kippur, to address the most profoundly spiritual of all questions: How to make the most of life. You see the question is not as Hamlet said, “to be or not to be;” but rather how to be and how not to be; that is the question. It is no coincidence that the signature prayer of these High Holy Days is Una-Tane-Tokef. You know it well.

We all hold our collective breath as we hear these words year after year, even as they sear our souls with existential fright.

Who shall live and who shall die?

Who shall see a ripe old age and who shall not?

Tonight let us look at our liturgy for clues to the answers that we ought to internalize, the wisdom of our Jewish heritage and traditions that informs our approach to living a life worth remembering.

The first answer has to do with marbles. Yes, marbles. The story is told of a Jewish woman who only when she reached the ripe age of 50, came to appreciate the beauty and wonder of Shabbat. She loved weekly Shabbat dinners with family and friends. She loved giving herself permission to refrain from weekday chores and worries like doing the wash, cleaning the house, running errands, and opening the mail. She loved the freedom to just be, to enjoy the things that used to get left for last, like taking long walks, catching up with friends, reading a good book or just taking a nap in the middle of the day, because you can. Unfortunately she felt bad for all the years she missed out on having not observed the wisdom of her inherited tradition as a Jew. So she made a plan, to make sure she would never take another Shabbat for granted. She calculated how many more Shabbatot she might have left to celebrate. She multiplied 52 weeks

times 30, hoping to live at least to the age of 80. Having reached the grand number of 1,560, she decided to buy a fish bowl and filled it with 1,560 marbles. At the end of each Shabbat, she would take one marble out. Over time, as the weeks and years went by, the number of marbles in the fish bowl diminished. She was able to visibly see the time passing by and learned to savor and cherish each and every possible Shabbat all the more. Every Shabbat became more precious than the previous one, recognizing that only a few marbles were left. As she neared the end of her marbles, she learned to appreciate the greatest commodity of all: time itself! The fleeting nature of time is indistinguishable from our self understanding of life unless we learn to count each day as potentially our last (again).

That is why the Una Tane Tokef prayer continues with these words: *K'dushat Ha-Yom* – the holiness of this day. In other words, this day, in fact any particular day, is potentially *Kadosh*, holy, as it can be set apart from all the rest by the way we choose to live it. As the Machzor proclaims at the end of the Yom Kippur morning service, Ha Yom Ha

Yom Ha Yom – Today, Today, Today – this is what matters. Make the most of every day. Carpe Diem. Seize the day; make it a day worth remembering. By the way, the marble lady went out and bought more marbles, making each Shabbat precious for many more years!

Recognizing that time is the most valuable commodity, the question remains how do we make the most of our time?

Again our familiar Una-Tane-Tokef provides the answer as it is written:

“For what is written there proclaims itself for it contains the signature of every human being.”

Take a look at this. This is what I use to find out what someone’s life was about after they have died. Some call it a funeral intake form. I call it your “blank page.” Only you and I can determine what will be written, what will be remembered, what ultimately remains of us after our life as we know it has ended.

Each little box represents an aspect of who you were. Your early years, where you were born and where you grew up, where you went to school, your relationship with your parents and siblings, how you met your partner for life, your soul mate. Your later years—how you spent your retirement, and how you met the challenges of aging, and in between the stuff that really matters. Who were you? What really mattered to you? If single words or phrases could capture the essence of your character, your personality, what would those words be? What adjectives would others use to describe you, your essential core as a human being? What were your passions, your interests, your hobbies? What did you do to make a living? What organizations did you support? How did you contribute to the betterment of our world? Who were you closest friends? What was your relationship like with your spouse, children, and grandchildren? How did Judaism express itself in your identity as a Jew? Were you involved in Jewish life? What were some of the most memorable occasions in your life? Family events, vacations, graduations and the like. What were your greatest successes, your most daunting challenges, and your most notable

failures? And finally, the most difficult question of all: what was your legacy? What did you leave behind as a life lesson for others to emulate? What were the most important priorities in your life?

Your blank page will hold the key, for what is written there proclaims itself, for it contains the signature of every human being.

Finally the most consequential question of all: How do you fill your “blank page” so that it is one worth remembering?

I turn to our Machzor and our High Holy Day liturgy for inspiration and perhaps the wisdom needed to answer this question.

In fact the three sections of the Shofar Service hold the keys to enlighten us, Malchyot, Zichronot, and Shofarot. Each one of these Shofar blasts serves to awaken us from our slumber, to remind us of the essential ingredients necessary to living a life worth remembering.

The first division of shofar calls, known as Malchyot, or Kingship verses, reminds us to be in the moment, to pay attention, to focus on what really matters for in appearing before a sovereign, a king or queen, one is certainly in a state of radical awareness. Malchyot

teaches us to be present. It also teaches us to live righteously, to sharpen our moral compass, to be a person of integrity, honesty, and generosity for a king, a sovereign is one who is watching, is judging. As it says, “even as all creation stands arrayed before you. But surely since each of us is created *b'tzelem* in the image and likeness of the King of Kings, then the ultimate judgement of the one before we must pass is the one looking back at us in the glass. Finally, Malchyot reminds us that the ultimate goal in life is to enter the next world with a crown, like one worn by a king or queen, except here we are reminded hopefully to brand upon our life's work a *Ketor shame tov*, the crown of a good name!

The next section of Shofar calls is known as Zichronot, verses of remembering. Indeed, perhaps the most powerful lesson in how to live a life worth remembering is to make memories as they used to say “Kodak moments,” the ones etched into our memory banks for a lifetime. Creating a treasure trove of memorable occasions which evoke pleasurable endorphins in the hearts and minds of those who

will remember us is important for sure. But depositing the memories even while we are alive helps us to draw pleasure hopefully from a life well-lived, a source of “sipuk nefesh,” a deep well of profound gratitude for precious moments and significant occasions.

Finally, Shofarot, verses that reference the ram’s horn, teach us that attitude is vital to how we fill our own blank page. You see the import of these biblical verses all point to a final victory of good over evil, of triumph over despair, of victory over defeat, when the great shofar of freedom will be heard signaling the Messianic Age.

So too must we learn to live with hope in our hearts, pep in our step, and optimism in our eyes. To refuse to give into cynicism, to see the glass half full, to choose to believe that tomorrow will be better than today, sometimes despite every reason not to, is what is necessary to live a life worth remembering. Cultivating an attitude of gratitude, actively choosing to assume an attitude of beatitude, this is precisely what Shofarot aims to instill within us to make the most of life. Allow me to conclude with a short story about a 92-year-old

woman who has much to teach us. This 92-year old petite, well-poised and proud lady, who is fully dressed each morning by eight o'clock, with her hair fashionably coiffed and makeup perfectly applied, even though she is legally blind, moved to a nursing home yesterday. Her husband of 70 years recently passed away, making the move necessary.

After many hours of waiting patiently in the lobby of the nursing home, she smiled sweetly when told her room was ready. As she maneuvered her walker to the elevator, I provided a visual description of her tiny room, including the eyelet sheets that had been hung on her window. "I love it," she stated with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old having just been presented with a new puppy.

"Mrs. Jones, you haven't seen the room . . . just wait."

That doesn't have anything to do with it, "she replied. "Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. Whether I like my room or not doesn't depend on how the furniture is arranged, it's how I

arrange my mind. I already decided to love it. It's a decision I make every morning when I wake up. I have a choice:

I can spend the day in bed recounting the difficulty I have with the parts of my body that no longer work, or get out of bed and be thankful for the ones that do. Each day is a gift, and as long as my eyes open I'll focus on the new day and all the happy memories I've stored away, just for this time in my life."

She went on to explain, "Old age is like a bank account, you withdraw from what you've put in. So, my advice to you would be to deposit a lot of happiness in the bank account of memories. Thank you for your part in filling my Memory bank. I am still depositing.

As long as we are alive, we too are actively depositing, we are filling in our blank page. On this Erev Yom Kippur, ask yourself "How have you spent your marbles?" Only your blank page will tell your life's story. Ha Yom, this very day and every day we are blessed to live, you and I determine what will be written. As on Yom Kippur, so too when

we breathe our last, may the seal we set upon our life's work be a good one, a Chatimah Tovah, a life worth remembering.

May this be God's will, and let us say Amen.