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“Great is the Power of This Day: Marty’s Sermon”

“*Unetaneh tokef kedushat hayom ki hu norah v’ayom* – let us declare the sacred power of this day it is awesome and fearful.” I have always found that prayer captivating. That may sound strange because, on one level, its theological basis is the idea that a Divine Judge prepares a ledger of all our names and inscribes whether we live or die in the coming year and seals that verdict today. It is hardly a theology I share. It is also not the most uplifting liturgy: “Who shall live and who shall die? Who by fire and so on...” The list of ways we could go caught my attention as a child. Growing up in a house where the nightly local news was our family’s dinner table background, I recognized how true the prayer was. If anything, the list was too short.

In older years, I recognized the real truth of this prayer. *Unetaneh tokef’s* central premise says that no matter how great we may be, our days on this earth are numbered and ultimately that number is beyond our control. Rabbi Arthur Green, in his Foreword to Agnon’s *Days of Awe*, made the point in this way: “The Yamim Noraim do not quite belong exclusively to the yearly [calendar] cycle. They partake of the lifecycle. They are the

Jew's annual confrontation with mortality, a time to pinch oneself and say, 'Thank God I'm still alive!'... and to pray that we'll still be here a year hence." That lesson has been driven home to me by a lot of experiences – especially as a rabbi. But the sudden death of my friend Marty this past year put a fine point on that understanding. He was physically fit, a cyclist and regular at the gym. Happily married with three girls and lots of friends. He was active in our temple in New Jersey, a board member and Shabbat service regular. One day in February, at a sales meeting in his Philadelphia office he complained of a headache, ten minutes after the meeting they found him in his office chair like he'd fallen into a dark, slack jawed sleep. He never opened his eyes again and he died a week later. He had suffered a massive brain hemorrhage.

We kept a constant vigil that week at Hahnemann Hospital – his family, a lot of friends, temple members and me. We covered a lot of Jewish ground together, but the "*unataneh tokef*" never once inserted itself into the conversation. Marty, on the other hand, has not returned the favor these days. He comes to mind and inserts himself every time I hear *unataneh tokef*.

Marty had one of those funerals that makes you think through your tears: "I hope, when my time comes, that my life will warrant even a fraction of this kind of honor." Marty was the kind

of person who felt that prayer and Jewish observance were not just supposed to tweak our emotions. He came to services weekly because it was part of a larger spiritual practice and life discipline that transcended the liturgy. He was a student of the game of life and he loved to talk shop with me: how could we be better? Each of us in our jobs, but also with our wives and with our children; better in service to our community; and how could we be more closely aligned with our truest selves? Marty was a living example of the rabbinic proverb: “*Eizeh hu chacham?* Who is wise? *Ha lomed me kol adam.* The one who learns from all people.” (Pirke Avot 4:1) He was as committed to other people’s improvement as he was to his own. So in his memory, I want to share with you some lessons I learned from him that I promised to pass on.

These are the things you should be moved to do in the spirit of *unetaneh tokef*. This is not a sexy sermon. This is no “Eat, Pray, Love.” These are real, responsible, direct things that you can and should do today and for which nobody will pat you on the back. Let’s start with some questions:

Who here today has a health care proxy – a document that clearly assigns by name one person to make medical decisions for you when you can not? Now to go one step further: Does that person and the rest of your family know who you have named to make

decisions for you? If you just said to yourself something like, “I’m sure they know who’s making the decisions,” – then your answer is no. You have not made it clear enough and you must. I shouldn’t need to invoke Terri Schiavo’s name to warn you against assuming that just because you’ve been married for years to the same person, your parents, brother, or anyone else are going to accept and support the hard decisions if, God forbid, they ever need to be made. This is all the more true if you do not have a spouse, partner, or other person who would be the natural “go-to” decision maker for you. Today’s a good day to be identifying that person if you haven’t done so already.

Next question: do you have a living will or other advance directive? This is a document that instructs the proxy you assign and your family, friends, and caregivers what you want them to do on your behalf should it ever become necessary. This is incredibly valuable in that it removes much of the potential doubt and the burden of the decision if your loved ones know that they are carrying out your plans and respecting your wishes. So, even if you have the documents, have you talked about your wishes with the people who need to know about them? Or did you just fill out the forms and file them? Again, if you just said to yourself, “Oh, I’m sure they know,” then your answer is no. Have the direct conversation with them and give them a copy of your living will

and tell them where to find the signed originals. Do that and you have completed your responsibility. Let's be clear: this is a responsibility on you. It is a mitzvah, a true imperative and it reflects the power of this day.

There are, I know, many good reasons why you have not done this already. This is awkward, the choices are confusing, the whole thing is scary. When you raise the topic with your family, they might rebuff you. Who really wants to talk about this stuff? That's exactly why I am talking about it with you today. Point them in my direction and tell them, "the rabbi is making me do this, so please cooperate and maybe he'll leave me alone." Maybe you feel the same as many people with whom I have had this talk: you don't plan on dying so soon. That's another reason to talk about it today.

Unetaneh tokef kedushat hayom ki hu norah v'ayom. This day is awesome and fearful. I look on the past year and think: There but for the grace of God went I. Looking forward is no more certain. Though we have no idea what awaits us this year, our ignorance can not be bliss. My own eyes have seen this: Amid the chaos of those first days at Hahneman, nobody in Marty's family or on his care team ever had a single doubt about who was charged to make the final decisions and what Marty would have wanted. There is no reason why every single adult in

this room should not have a health care proxy and advance directive by the time we light the menorah (that is by the way only 74 shopping days off). I will give you for free this packet called “The Five Wishes,” which includes both proxy and advance directive documents that you can execute yourself. It is legal in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, and 40 other states. The only condition is that you have to email, call or stop in to get a copy and have a 5 minute run through with me on completing the document. It requires witnesses' signatures, which I am happy to do for you. And, we will keep a copy with your family's records at the temple if you'd like to give one to us.

Here's another lesson that you should act on today: Take up the mitzvah of *matan hayim*, giving life and register yourself to be an organ donor.

Marty's death was such an intense experience in part because he turned out to be the perfect organ donor. He was Type O blood – a universal donor, the rarest kind. He was in great physical shape and although he was eventually pronounced brain dead, he had gotten to the hospital and onto a respirator so quickly, his body didn't lack oxygen for any critical time. On top of it all, Marty's wife and daughters all agreed that he would want

them to donate whatever they could. With that permission in place, Marty became, sadly, the great hope for a lot of people.

I would trade back all this experience in return for Marty being here, but I can't. So, all I have left is to be forever grateful that I walked with Marty all the way to the end of this road. I learned that, all over the country, teams of elite surgeons are in a state of constant readiness, waiting for somebody like Marty to provide the one last thing they need to save somebody's life. They move through city streets with sirens blaring and onto jets like the President. They recover the organs and rush back to patients who are prepped and waiting in surgical suites for the most precious gift possible.

When Marty was actually pronounced brain dead, a crowd had gathered in his room. Dozens of doctors, nurses, administrators and students had found their way to the room. Word had spread and people just wanted to be there to feel the mitzvah. The hospital lab had basically stopped everything for about 10 minutes to get the fastest reading on Marty's blood gas. When the nurse ran in with the final numbers, it felt like the axis of earth had shifted through that room. There was an unbearable, balanced presence of death and new life in the same space. I've had only a handful of mystically transcendent moments in my rabbinate. That was one of them.

But did you know that Jews are among the lowest participants in organ donation in the world? There is a long-standing misconception in the Jewish community that organ donation is forbidden by Jewish law. It is true that Judaism places great emphasis on *kevod ha-met*, honor for the dead. Some are concerned that organ donation delays burial, which as you know, Jews are instructed to do as quickly as possible. Others cite superstitions about bodily resurrection and the need for one's entire body to have been buried in its entirety to qualify. But it's also true that saving a life supersedes everything according to Jewish law. In a frequently studied text it even says that a pregnant woman can be fed pork on Yom Kippur in order to save her life. So, when the mitzvah of saving a life clashes with another mitzvah or prohibition, saving a life always wins. Now that medical science has achieved such success with transplants, the possibility of saving a life through organ and tissue donation makes it not only permissible but encouraged and mitzvah-worthy.

The Reform movement considers organ donation to be a mitzvah of *matan chaim*, giving life. The conservative movement, in an official responsum on the subject from 1997 concluded strongly: "The preservation of human life is obligatory, not optional. Since all conflicting religious obligations are suspended,

and specific, readily identifiable human lives are at stake, withholding consent for post-mortem organ donation when needed for life-saving transplant procedures is prohibited by Jewish law. This applies to the individual in anticipation of his or her own death, as well as to health care proxies or next of kin. The identity and, certainly, the religious status of the recipient are irrelevant. A bereaved family member who grants consent for organ donation acts as an agent and partner of the deceased in observance of the mitzvah of *pikuah nefesh*, in saving human lives by so doing, he or she renders only profound and genuine honor to the deceased, while simultaneously bringing comfort to those who mourn.” Orthodox authorities in Israel, like Rabbi Saul Israeli, z'l, issued similar responsa calling organ donation a “mitzvah” that supercedes any prohibitions regarding kevod hamet.

How many people here are registered organ donors? How many people don't know? Well, you are in luck because it's now as easy as clicking a few buttons on your computer, and you can register online. This one should not wait until the first night of Hanukkah. Because it is so easy. Take one of the pamphlets in the lobby as you exit. This form “Matan Haim” includes a donor registration card you can sign. There are also registration forms and information from the Transplant Resource Community – our

regional clearinghouse and organizer of organ donor education and actual transplant services. They sent me keychains and other promotional materials that you should take as well. But most importantly, do this mitzvah: Save a Life. Register today as an organ donor.

The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer is hard to ignore. Its words are the most true of the prayers we offer even if we'd rather not hear them. *Ki hu norah v'ayom* – this day has a powerful hold over us because we acknowledge and confront our own mortality on it. The climactic statement of this prayer, however, comes after the litany of who shall live and who shall die. You can read it on top of page 314: “U'teshuva u'tefilah u'tzedakah – repentance, prayer and charity – Maavirin et ro-ah ha-gezerah.” The prayer book says “temper judgment's severe decree,” but that is not a good translation, and it misses the point. What the prayer says is that we are not meant only to decree our own mortality, pinch ourselves and say, “Thank God we are alive!” *Maavirin et ro-ah ha-gezerah* means to get by or around (maavir) this terrible though true reality; and we do that through our own agency: through mitzvot and by walking a path of sacred focus that gets us around – transcends, we would say in today's spiritual talk – the harsh reality that otherwise could obstruct us. A Talmudic

commentary – Sifte Hayim on Rosh Hashanah 17a - explains that this concept of 'maavir' is analogous to a road being almost totally blocked, but one can still pass by. No matter what you do, at a certain point you can't eradicate the roeh hagezerah – the terrible decree we acknowledge on this day, the acknowledgment of our own mortality. But one can reduce the paralysis, hopelessness, or apathy that such knowledge could create to the degree that you can - maavirin – you can get past it; you can transcend it. The prayer cites teshuvah, tefillah (prayer) and tzedakah, as the mitzvot best suited for that effort. I give you two more mitzvot today whose spirit is the same.

Unetaneh tokef kedushat hayom ki hu norah v'ayom – let us declare the sacred power of this day it is awesome and fearful. This day reminds me with deep sadness that my friend Marty, who loved coming to services and had his regular spot right about there, will never say this prayer again. It also reminds me that Marty doesn't need it. Not just because he's already learned the number of his days but because he was *maavirin et roah ha-gezerah*. He had, through his mitzvot, transcended the bad reality we know we can't escape.

Please, take this seriously. These mitzvot are so simple and have such a potentially huge impact – on you, on your friends and family, and on people out there whose need for your help is so great yet so hidden from your sight. Do your living wills and health care proxies. Be an organ donor.

Shanah tovah.