

## Rabbi Stephanie's Kol Nidre Sermon 2019

Tonight is a dress rehearsal of our death. In traditional circles, people dress in white on Yom Kippur to emulate a burial shroud. We arrive just as we are, without masks or facades of makeup, fancy clothes or leather shoes. Many of us will sit here over the next twenty-four hours with empty, potentially grumbling bellies as we refrain from eating and drinking, depriving ourselves of the sustenance we need to live.

This ritual of reenacting our own death each year poses the question, "If I died this very second, what would I leave behind? Who would show up to my funeral? What would they say about me after I am gone?" For many of us, these questions are scary or uncomfortable. However, instead of being scared of the answers, let us be inspired by the answers.

In 1888, Alfred Nobel was inspired by this very thought. One morning, Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, awoke to read his own obituary. The obituary was printed as a result of a simple journalistic error. You see, it was Alfred's brother who had died. The reporter carelessly reported the death of the wrong brother.

Any one would be disturbed under the circumstances, but to Alfred, the shock was overwhelming, because he was first able to see himself as the world saw him: the "Dynamite King," the great industrialist who had made an immense fortune from explosives. This, as far as the general public was concerned, was the entire purpose of Alfred's life. He was simply a merchant of death. And, for that alone, he would be remembered.

As Alfred read the obituary with horror, he resolved to clarify the true meaning and purpose of his life through the final disposition of his fortune. His last will and testament would be the expression of his life's ideals and ultimately would be the reason we know of him today. He bequeathed his fortune to establish the five Nobel prizes. I can't imagine a better example of leaving a legacy.

You might skeptically think, but I don't have a fortune to make myself known, or...that story, it's just not me. That's ok. No one expects you to come up with the next Nobel Prize.

Rabbi Samantha Kahn reminds us "the purpose of this Yom Kippur ritual is not to make us feel as though we have died but rather to remind us that we are, all of us, dying at some point and therefore must live with an awareness that our time on this earth is a gift."

Building a legacy is to account for your actions. To look back at the year we just finished and to take notice of trends and pitfalls, allowing us to look forward with renewed hope.

I would never tell you to try to be Alfred or Ruth Bader Ginsberg or even Moses. To

be happy and fulfilled you have to be you – the best you you can be.

Accepting who we are or are supposed to be is often difficult. None of us looks at ourselves and thinks, “Wow, I am perfect just the way I am!”

We look at examples set forth by others and aspire to be someone else, to fit into other molds. Rabbi Jordie Gerson argues, “Too often, our standards for ourselves – and our children and spouses and grandchildren – are simply unrealistic; we aspire to be what we see in magazines and on TV, on Instagram and in our Facebook feeds. And so many of us, when we look in the mirror, focus on our imperfections, our extra pounds and flaws, our wrinkles and sags, our bald spots and age spots and jowls and necks. Too often, we speak to ourselves with a cruelty we would never use with the ones we love.”

This dissonance between our reflection and the unattainable we are constantly striving for causes great pain and anguish. There are times when we try to change our sexuality or even personalities. But we should not attempt to be someone else.

The Torah tells us (in Deuteronomy 34:10), "no one will ever be as great as Moses!" yet the Talmud instructs us, "Everyone is supposed to be as great as Moses." So what are we supposed to do? Should we just desist from trying to be great? Of course not. But this impossible paradigm is set up to illustrate the poignant lesson taught by Zusya, a great Chassidic master.

Zusya was a great rabbi in his day. One day, his students found him crying. Zusya had just learned that when he died, God would ask him about his life.

His students didn't understand why Zusya, of all people, would be nervous. "Zusya, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?"

Zusya replied, "I have learned that God will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?' and that God will not ask, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the Promised Land?' Zusya sighed; "God will ask me, 'Zusya, why weren't you more like Zusya?'"

This lesson is one of the most profound lessons in Judaism. You were meant to be exactly who you are! You're perfect just the way you are. The hard part is being content with yourself.

How can I be more like myself, when there is so much I don't like?

What about all the areas for improvement?

What about the way others see me?

What about the inner critic, screaming from the inside?

Those are the thoughts of self-doubt that chip away at our happiness day-by-day. Remember, God will one day ask you, why were you not more like yourself.

What if we were able to embrace our imperfections? Maybe even see our brokenness as our strengths? What if we were able to say, "I am perfect the way I am and a little broken too."

Rick Weiner, a California rabbi whom I spent time with at Camp Newman this summer, has a bit of an obsession with guitars... He had the honor of watching a master luthier – someone who has created some of the most stunning guitars, works of art that sound as beautiful as they look– at work. Rabbi Rick watched him pick up a plank... about so big (show size)... one of the boards that would be bent into a side for a guitar. Harvey held it up with one hand and tapped it with a finger. Listened. He smiled and said, "That will make a great guitar." One tap... and he could tell it would be an exquisite sounding guitar.

Luthiers carefully examine their choices of wood, planks commonly stored in special, climate controlled vaults. They not only want the finished product to sound good, but they also want it to look good, which is why Rabbi Rick was puzzled when he saw a gorgeous, one-of-a-kind guitar that Harvey handcrafted with a knot in the wood. "Harvey, I'm curious, why would you use a board with a knot?"

Harvey's reply was unforgettable, especially because he does not consider himself a religious man. "If it was good enough for the one who made the tree, then it's good enough for me."

If we could truly internalize this theology, that we were created in perfect form, body mind and soul, we would look at our reflections and smile! Following this theology, *B'tzelem Elohim*, being made in the Divine's image, being made with intention and perfection, would change our entire outlook. Our knots are what make us who we are! Of course, we can work to improve, but improvement is different from change.

This is not only a lesson on physical happiness but also a perception on achievement and attitude. If I were able to stop beating myself up for being dyslexic and not having a better command of the language, I would be able to see the gifts of living with a learning challenge. I would see that this challenge has made me more compassionate. We all have examples like this, things about ourselves, both physical and behavioral, that we wish weren't so. Maybe it's our weaknesses or maybe it's our strengths. But if we could really accept ourselves for who we are rather than trying to always be someone else, we would be happier! We all have these pieces of brokenness, little knots woven into our woodwork. It's all about changing the framework.

I recently confided in a fellow gym goer that I often give up toward the end of a group workout. She kindly reframed by asking, Are you giving up or listening to

your body? This is the reframing voice we all need to listen to! We need to develop and strengthen our “reframing voices”.

Yom Kippur is a mirror into the soul. What if, while looking at our reflections, we were able to reframe our perspective? What if we didn't see eyes with crow's feet, or glasses, but eyes that have seen miraculous sights, vineyards, mountains, beaches and the faces of our loved ones?

What if we saw in our stretch marks the children we bore, the strength we gained and the years we lived?

What if we saw our gray hair as the lessons we have learned, the roads we have traveled and a new blank palate to have fun with in the next year?

What if we looked at our bodies and celebrated how they allow us to live daily, how we can stand, walk, run, sit and breathe, rather than complaining about the aches, pains, curves, crevasses, cellulite or wrinkles?

What if, instead of seeing our perpetual impatience as a flaw, we saw it as our greatest driving force?

What if, instead of seeing our exhaustion as a lack of endurance, we saw it as a day well spent?

What if we spoke silently to ourselves with the same kindness we use with others? Then we would see the perfection of creation. We would see *B'tzelem Elohim* everywhere, in everyone. We are all created *B'telem Elohim*, in the Divine's image.

Dan Nichols, a Jewish educator and musician, wrote a beautiful version of *Asher Yatzar*, our morning blessing thanking God for our life, body and soul. His wisdom is profound, “I'm perfect the way I am and a little broken too.” What would our days look like if we woke each morning and repeated these words?

What, if on this Yom Kippur, during this dress rehearsals of our deaths, we embraced exactly who we are, threw away visions of celebrities, heroes, the Joneses, Alfred Nobel and Moses, and celebrated our perfection and brokenness.

Lets look at ourselves in the mirror of *Yom Kippur* and say with a huge, proud smile, “I'm perfect the way I am and a little broken, too”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFd2F4J34SE&feature=youtu.be&autoplay=1>