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Yom Kippur Eve 5768

### *Yom Kippur's Journey*

As you entered the sanctuary each of you received with your service program a small envelope marked PLEASE DO NOT OPEN UNTIL RABBI DAVIDSON'S INSTRUCTIONS. For those whose curiosity has not already gotten the better of them, you may now open the envelope.

Rabbi Simcha Bunam taught, we should carry with us these two statements: one from Genesis, *V'anochi afar va'efer*, "I am but dust and ashes;"<sup>1</sup> and the other from Mishnah Sanhedrin, *Bishvili nivrah ha'olam*, "For my sake the world was created."<sup>2</sup> One goes in our left pocket to impress upon us our smallness; the other in our right pocket to remind us of our greatness.

This tension "between vulnerability and action"<sup>3</sup> as Rabbi Milton Steinberg called it confronts us throughout these Holy Days. It is my theme tonight. So go ahead and put one slip in each pocket.

*"I am but dust and ashes"*

One Kol Nidre Eve a rabbi decides to model repentance for his congregation. Humbly he approaches the Ark. Beseeking the Almighty for forgiveness, he beats his breast proclaiming: "Before You God, I am nothing. I am nothing." The cantor sees him and joins in: "I am nothing. I am nothing," she cries. The temple president, sensing that he too must get in on the act, now comes up. "I am nothing. I am nothing," he sobs. In the silence that follows, the rabbi turns to the cantor and whispers: "Look who thinks he's nothing."

For ten days a year, the *Yamim Noraim* challenge us to adopt a posture that says, "Before you God, we are nothing." We even recite the words: "*Avinu Malkeinu* remember that we are dust." But as that joke suggests, saying the words is one thing; meaning them is quite another.

Yet unless we allow the reality of our insignificance before God to penetrate on some level, then the spiritual rebirth that should come with these Days of Awe, won't come for us. So take out the slip with the words "I am but dust and ashes," and consider them. What do they mean?

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 18:27.

<sup>2</sup> *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:5.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Milton Steinberg in "Rosh Hashanah 5765 – First Day," Rabbi Dr. Analia Bortz.

First, each of us is terribly small – as we read, “a particle of dust floating on the wind.” Relative to God we are inconsequential.

Second, our power over our lives is limited. “Who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled” remains beyond our control.

Third, each of us is mortal...dust.

*Kol Nidre*, which we heard this evening, confronts us with our mortality. With its scrolls removed the Ark is but an empty box, an *aron*, a casket. The *kittel*, the traditional garment worn by men on Yom Kippur, is white like a funeral shroud. *Kol Nidre* brings us face to face with the end. Each of us will die. None can escape.

Not even Moses, who was furious with God for his fate that he would not enter the Promised Land despite forty trying years of leadership. According to the Midrash, Moses resists. He draws a small circle around himself, stands defiantly inside it, and threatens: “Master of the universe, I will not budge from here until you void your decree.”<sup>4</sup>

But no circle can protect him. His death may be terribly unfair. But death is not fair.

Many in our congregational family have come face to face with their mortality in recent months. You have been touched by your own sickness or the loss of loved ones -- husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, parents and grandparents, friends, children. We learn that fairness is not promised. We don't need the slip of paper or the story of Moses to teach us what the pain of our own lives has already taught us.

But that note and that midrash do teach us something else: there will be places we will not go, goals we will not reach, questions we will never answer. But these are not failures, or God's disfavor. They are the limits of our lives. We do not live forever. Those we love do not live forever. Bad things do happen to good people. This is the way of the world. We do not understand it, and we cannot control it. Moses himself had to exit the circle of life, and so must we.

In a beautiful comment on the midrash, our own Rabbi Dr. Norman Cohen writes: “Moses teaches all of us about the struggle to accept our mortality, especially when we are cognizant of all that we will miss in the future...We who long to see the fulfillment of our visions and efforts, or our children grow and mature, and have their own families and establish their own careers, know Moses's pain.”<sup>5</sup>

When we die, something of life's promise remains unfulfilled.

“Our days are scrolls,” wrote Bachya. We write upon them the Torah of our lives. But sooner or later, every scroll must reach its end. The scribe's quill is lowered. The writing is no more.

This is Yom Kippur's message to us....

*“For my sake the world was created”*

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<sup>4</sup> *Devarim Rabbah* 11:10.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Cohen, *Moses and the Journey to Leadership*, p. 164.

But only part of Yom Kippur's message. There is more. "Everyone has two pockets," Simcha Bunam taught, "to use as the occasion demands:" one if we become haughty and forget our place in God's universe; and another if we despair and lose our way. Take out the other slip.

"For my sake the world was created." How different an outlook this is! It does not deny the inevitability or the unfairness of death. Rather it affirms the potential of life! If Yom Kippur reminds us of the limits, it also teaches us that we have the power to live lives of extraordinary meaning and beauty in the time that we have.

We are not inconsequential. We are taught that "Man stamps many coins with one die and they are all alike; but the Holy One stamps all humanity with the mold of the first human being and every one of us is different! Therefore each of us is duty bound to say, 'For my sake the world was created.'"<sup>6</sup>

Each of us is precious. Each of us brings a gift to this world that no one else can, without which God's creation would be incomplete. And our uniqueness bears witness to God's greatness.

The historian Harry Elmer Barnes argued, "Astronomically speaking, man is almost totally insignificant -- to which the theologian George Albert Coe rejoined, "Astronomically speaking, man is an astronomer."<sup>7</sup>

"For my sake the world was created" teaches us to look at ourselves and the joys of our lives, great and small, as gifts to be treasured, nurtured and explored.

Edna St. Vincent Millay understood. In her poem "God's World," she wrote:

O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!

Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!

Thy mists that roll and rise!

Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag

And all but cry with colour! That gaunt crag

To crush! To lift the lean of that black bluff!

World, world, I cannot get thee close enough!

"For my sake the world was created" teaches us that we are not powerless. When Abraham utters the words "I am but dust and ashes" he is in the midst of arguing with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of the righteous. He defies God: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"<sup>8</sup>

"How can dust become the one whose thought is more than dust?"<sup>9</sup> We can make our lives stand for something. We can rail with Abraham against the world's injustice. We become more than dust when we fight for our ideals and aspirations and remind ourselves of their enduring value and give our lives transcendent meaning.

Indeed the High Holy Days summon us to repair the broken places of this world. That is why so many of us wrestle with the global challenges of poverty and hunger and homelessness.

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<sup>6</sup> *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:5.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Jerome Malino in "To Look at the Sky," Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson, Rosh Hashanah Eve 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 18:25.

<sup>9</sup> *Gates of Repentance*, Ed. Rabbi Chaim Stern, p. 410.

And the High Holy Days beckon us to repair the fractured relationships in our own lives. Now is the time. If we wait for others to reach out, it may be too late. We must take the first step.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells of a colleague “counseling a young woman who had had a falling out with her parents and had not spoken to them for several years”:

He asked her, “If you were to get a phone call today that they had died, would you go to their funeral?” The woman thought for a moment and said “Yes, I suppose I would.” The rabbi asked “Why?” And the woman said “because I guess I owe them that. They are my parents. And because I’m afraid I would feel guilty for the rest of my life if I didn’t, and I don’t want that. I would go because I would need that sense of closure.” The rabbi said “Good answer. So why are you waiting for a funeral? Why not go to them now, when you could both have a sense of closure?” The woman started to cry, realizing that there was a part of her that didn’t want to go on being angry at her parents. She went home and later that day made that phone call.<sup>10</sup>

Each of us will die; the decree cannot be averted. But the *Unetaneh Tokef* comforts us: *uteshuvah, utefilah, utzedakah ma’avirin et roa hagezera*, “repentance, prayer, and acts of justice avert the evil of that decree.”

Now we understand what that means. We cannot prevent death. But we can make certain that if death does come, we will not look back with regret -- because we have reached out to repair relationships, with our parents, our children, our siblings, our spouses; because we have attempted to right some wrong; because we have linked our lives to enduring values and by doing so given our lives lasting worth.

Late tomorrow afternoon, we will read Rabbi Chaim Stern’s beautiful words: “In woman and man, children of dust and offspring of heaven, You have blended two worlds: perishable earth and immortal soul; finite matter, locked into time and space, and infinite spirit, which endures through all eternity.”<sup>11</sup>

Each of us will die. But the meaning of our lives need not die.

According to the Midrash, Moses was desperate to live. So on the day of his death he busied himself writing the Torah, the scroll of God’s teachings he had come to embody for his people. The Torah -- the text of Moses’s life, a life linked to Divine purpose – would be his immortality! So can the message of our lives live forever.<sup>12</sup>

Rabbi Steven Leder tells an insightful story about his rabbinical school homiletics class:

One day, the professor took out the obituary section of the newspaper, cut it into pieces, and put the pieces in a hat. Our assignment was to write a eulogy for the person whose obituary we pulled out of the hat. Obituaries don’t usually tell you very much....That meant [for the purpose of this exercise] we had to imagine what the person’s life might have been like.

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<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Harold Kushner, “While There is Still Time.”

<sup>11</sup> *Gates of Repentance*, Ed. Rabbi Chaim Stern, p. 521.

<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Cohen, *Moses and the Journey to Leadership*, p. 171.

We had to create the details, stories, dreams and accomplishments, in order to imbue their death with meaning....Although I didn't realize it at the time, that assignment...was a graphic example of an important truth....Every day we are creating the details, acts of love, stories, visions and legacy of our lives....We write [them] with the pen of our lives.<sup>13</sup>

That is why Bachya said: "Our days are scrolls." Write upon them acts of kindness and fairness toward your fellow human beings, expressions of love toward those most precious to you. "Write upon them what you wish to be remembered." Yom Kippur impels us to consider the texts of our lives, the stories we will leave behind. And it assures us, that if the values of Torah infuse them with gentleness and justice, then our lives too will have transcendent meaning.

*Keep one slip in each pocket. You'll know when you need them.*

"I am but dust and ashes."

"For my sake the world was created."

Keep one slip in each pocket. You'll know when you need them.

Rabbi Simcha Bunam, who gave us those two slips, taught that we are always moving back and forth through two doors: out of this world and into the next world, and out and in again.<sup>14</sup> Tomorrow afternoon, at the close of these Holy Days, we will return to those doors, to the Ark, the *aron*, and blast the shofar one final time. That sound has been compared to the wail of a woman in labor, and to a newborn's cry. If we are willing to take Yom Kippur's journey and consider the truths in our pockets, then *Neilah* can be our rebirth into a new year.

May it be a year of humility and wonder, reconciliation and repair. May we bind our lives to God's purpose, and give our lives transcendent meaning. And may we hold the world closer than ever before, knowing that for our sake it was created.

Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Steven Z. Leder, "The Pen of Our Lives," *The Extraordinary Nature of Ordinary Things*, pp.130-31.

<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Allen S. Maller, "Hassidic Wisdom: Sayings and Stories."