

THE NEW SHUL / Kol Nidre 5768 (2007)***Sermon by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein***

Yom Kippur, perhaps more than any other day, brings us face to face with our lives, *and* face to face with our deaths. It teaches us that we are all images of God, yet it also reminds us— as we fast, and thirst, and *crave*— that we are nothing more than dust and ashes.

Yom Kippur makes us confront our mortality— Do we *recoil* from it in fear and trembling? Do we accept it with sullen *resignation*? Do we *rage* against the dying of the light? Or do we *pretend* that we will live forever and embark on a joyride of denial?

Every one of us will respond in a different way, that much, at least, we can be sure of. But how can *Judaism* help to guide us on the human journey? I want to share a personal story with you tonight that will try to answer that question, a true story of life and death, of terror and defiance, of surrender and of heroism.

I never knew my great-uncle David very well. He lived in Dallas, and I grew up in Chicago, so our paths crossed only a couple of times at family gatherings while I was a child. But I'd heard he'd lived a very rich life, filled with colorful experiences and challenges, that he had been in combat as a tank commander during the D-Day invasion in France, and I always had a romantic, idealized, almost mythic image and vision of him as a *fighter*.

When I was older, David and I finally had a chance for a few real conversations, mainly about his wartime experiences, but also about Judaism, ritual practice, and God— he and my great-aunt Charlotte had strong religious identities and were active in the Dallas Jewish community. To me, David was one of those archetypal figures who belonged to, and embodied, what Tom Brokaw calls “the Greatest Generation.”

David and I had our last actual conversation while I was in Dallas for a conference. By that point, David was an old man— he had a serious heart condition and was very ill. The condition had been with him a long time, and my parents had said for several years that he could succumb to it at any moment— but, fighter that he was, he somehow kept hanging on. As usual, David was humble and stoic, and he was far more interested in talking about Jewish beliefs and Middle East politics than he was in discussing his heart problems.

After the conference, I returned to New York and began my career as a young rabbi. David watched my early rabbinate unfold with genuine interest, always asking my parents what new position I had taken up and what new book I was working on. He actually even *read* most of my writing— a definite sign of devotion and love when it comes from *any* family member.

Some years passed; David's health deteriorated. My parents gave me regular updates on his situation, and I spoke with Charlotte on occasion over the phone to find out how David was doing. When I got a chance to travel again to Dallas, to tail and write a magazine article about a professional storm chaser, I went first to visit my great-uncle at their home.

Charlotte welcomed me and led me inside the house into the bedroom. David was there, along with a nurse. He was lying on a cot, and there were tubes attached to his body. He was near death. I tried to say hello, but David didn't seem to recognize me, and he couldn't have spoken to me anyway. He slipped in and out of consciousness, and he was in great pain, despite the morphine. At times, David would curl up into a fetal position. When he moved, he let out a moan that chilled me to the bone.

I sat down with Charlotte at the kitchen table. She told me that David's death was no longer a matter of weeks or even days away, but of hours and minutes. She didn't cry: "I've been getting myself ready for this for years," she said in her southern drawl. It was clear how much she loved him, but it was also clear she knew there was nothing more that she—or anyone—could do now for David. "He's in so much pain," she said, "I just want him to finally let go, and let it end."

And just then, something suddenly struck me. Although I was David's great-nephew, I was also an ordained member of the clergy. We rabbis, ministers, and priests often lose sight of, or feel ambivalent about, our *clerical* roles when we're in the presence of our families. It's easier to fall back into more familiar roles as nephews, nieces, sons, and daughters. But I felt that, at this moment, Niles "the Rabbi" might be of more help to David than Niles the great-nephew. I suggested to Charlotte that I pray with him.

I returned to the bedroom, and stood over David. This figure who, in so many ways, had always seemed larger than life to me now looked so small. His limbs were thin and frail, and he was moaning. His right leg hung off the side of the cot, and he appeared as if he *already* had one foot in the grave. David had always come across as so grounded, so rooted in the real world. Yet now his appearance was ethereal. The *roots* that had held him down in his life—through immigration to a new country, through the Great Depression, through a World War far away from Texas—were now being *extracted* before my very eyes.

I placed my hand, delicately, on David's leg. He gazed up at me with a kind of vague recognition, then looked away toward my great-aunt. I decided to recite the Sh'ma, one of Judaism's most important prayers, with him, and *for* him. It is a statement of Jewish religious belief—the affirmation of and commitment to monotheism—that is traditionally said, not just upon going to bed and upon waking up, but also, if possible, on one's deathbed: *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*—Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one.

David gazed at me again. I'm not certain that he knew who I was, or that he really understood the words I uttered, but in his singular glance I felt that something was being *exchanged* between us, something intangible, powerful, and elemental.

Less than an hour later, I received a phone call from Charlotte at the place I was staying. She informed me that David had died. I told her how sorry I was, how great a man I thought David had been. Charlotte said she was convinced that, on some level, David grasped the words I had recited, that saying the *Sh'ma* had helped him to let go, to give up his long, defiant fight. To me, then and now, David was still a *warrior*. But what I witnessed was a different kind of heroism—the heroism of *surrender*. David had not given up; he had, instead, chosen to give *over*, to surrender his soul—on his own terms, in his own way, and with great courage. I am a firm monotheist, but I am not a big believer in “supernatural” events and phenomena. Yet I couldn't help feeling that, somehow, in some way, there was a deep, mysterious link between that prayer and my great-uncle's relinquishment of his life.

As Jung writes, “‘Physical’ is not the only criterion of truth: There are also *psychic* truths which can neither be explained, proved, nor contested in any physical way.”

One of the central things that struck me most about David's death was that it seemed more an *affirmation* than a negation of his life. It was not a suicide, a fatal assault on one's own being. David didn't *take* his life—he *gave* it. Suicide is a false kind of surrender, a rejection—not a reluctant relinquishment—of the gift of life that is grounded in despair, or mental illness. Surrender at its deeper, more spiritual level involves no such negativity. It is a loving attempt to re-unite with God and, when death is imminent, to do it in an absolute and purely non-material way. That final exertion requires a *detachment* from the world of the living.

Artists, writers, and composers often have a sense that their work is not something they achieve, but that they *receive*. While mystics describe having their souls *infused* by the divine spirit, even *atheists* in the creative fields talk about the mysterious role of the “Muse,” the source of their inspiration. Etymologically, “inspiration” *means* the interiorization of spirit—but for that to occur, we must first *surrender* to its call. The boundaries between creative inspiration and spiritual revelation are far more porous than many of us may think.

Erich Fromm discusses how the *Sabbath* embodies that same integration of the material and the spiritual. For Fromm, the Sabbath—the core institution in biblical religion—is the expression of freedom in its fullest form. Yet it is a freedom grounded in the ideas of giving up and of giving over.

In traditional Judaism and Christianity, the Sabbath is a day when we refrain from work. As Fromm writes, “By not working—that is to say, by not participating in the process of natural and social change—man is free from the chains of time, although only for one day a week.” The Sabbath is our anticipation of *messianic* time, a taste of eternity that

only *we* can allow ourselves to experience. All the more so is this true on Yom Kippur, a day the rabbi's refer to as *Shabbat Shabbatot*, "The Sabbath of Sabbaths."

In Fromm's view of his own Jewish tradition, it is not *work* that is a supreme value, but "rest," the state that has no other purpose than that of being human. Since Fromm was a psychoanalyst, the Sabbath probably seemed to him a wonderful vehicle for self-actualization.

But for Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the Sabbath is the point of synthesis between the aesthetic *and* the psycho-spiritual. On the Sabbath, every one of us has the potential to become an artisan of the soul, to create, what he calls, "palaces in time." But that spiritual architecture is contingent on our helping to construct it—without its builders doing their job, the palace will never be realized. The paradox is that our work and our freedom are the result of simply *being*. When we dwell in the palace, and when we allow the palace to dwell in us, we create a harmony of mind and spirit, of human and divine—we live in the eternal *now*. Believe it or not, we are *there* at this moment, on this Sabbath of Sabbaths.

Some religious thinkers have argued that faith requires our making a leap into *uncertainty*, and a willingness to adhere to an attitude of infinite resignation, about our ability to fathom the radical *mystery* of God. In the spiritual context, *surrender* thus becomes something that is far more *active* than something passive.

Fromm, as a staunch psychoanalyst and *non-mystic*, calls this having the "x attitude." He claims that, irrespective of whether there is a God, such an attitude can be of enormous benefit to us as human beings, for it produces "a letting go of one's *ego*, one's *greed*, and with it, of one's *fears*; a giving up the wish to hold onto the ego as if it were an indestructible, *separate* entity; a making oneself *empty* in order to be able to *fill* oneself with the world, to respond to it, to become one with it, to love it. To make oneself empty does not express passivity but *openness*."

Authentic freedom is not about having the ability to choose between multiple options, but about bringing one's will into alignment with the will of the cosmic order. This may seem counterintuitive, yet even with all of the new "freedoms" that the last century has given us—quick and easy divorces, high-speed internet access, dozens of brands of bottled water—*happiness* still seems as rare a human commodity as ever.

It is when we give over, when our goals and desires mesh with and become indistinguishable from those of the divine harmony, that life takes on a more liberating and, ultimately, fulfilling dimension. Letting go of our preoccupation with self can feel like experiencing a little *death*, but what we gain in return is a greater sense of direction and a new, deeper, and much more meaningful life.

The connection of this truth with a relationship to prayer, religion, and, yes, God, was made very clear to me through my experience at the deathbed of my great-uncle David. Although I was just an intermediary, and offered the *Sh'ma* prayer *for* him, that act

allowed me to let go, to place myself in a zone of discomfort and take on the role of conduit. As a result, David was *also* able to let go, to detach from this world, and to begin his journey into the next one.

When we are truly able to vacate our souls of ego, we make space for the divine to dwell within us. As one great Jewish mystic asks, “Where is God to be found?” His answer: “In every place that we allow God room to enter.”

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When we surrender to this existential reality, when we give over to *truth* and move beyond fear, anger, and denial, we enter a different world, a realm of radical mystery and of even more radical *possibility*. It takes courage to surrender, to summon reserves we never thought we had. But, in the end, *courage* is our only door from despair to hope— all else is vanity.

May this New Year open for us doors of hope, may it bring us new beginnings and necessary endings. May this year transform and transport, repair and renew, inspire and enchant. May 5768 allow us to view uncertainty and doubt not as obstacles, but as *opportunities* for the betterment of ourselves, our communities, and our wounded, wonderful world.

Ken Yehi Ratzon—May it Be God’s Will