



Temple Rodef Shalom

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For much of my life, I felt that the Jewish calendar had Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur backwards. It seemed to me, that if I were going to begin something new – say the New Year – I would want to approach that beginning completely fresh and with a clean slate. With that in mind, wouldn't it make more sense to have Yom Kippur first and Rosh Hashanah second? We would reflect and repent and improve ourselves, and then, of course, we would be ready to launch into the New Year! Doesn't that seem logical?

At some point during my years in Rabbinic School I learned how it came to be that Rosh Hashanah was chosen to open the 10 Days of Awe and Yom Kippur was assigned the closing role. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are not actually stand-alone holidays. They were designed together, along with the days in between, to form a package, a complete set replete with rich symbolism that takes all of us on a journey from the beginning of our lives to our very last moments. Through our High Holy Day rituals we live a lifetime in just 10 days; we travel from birth to death and it is only after such a profound experience that we can truly embrace the New Year.

Think about it, Rosh Hashanah is all about birth. We believe that the world was created on this day. Hayom Harat Olam – Our tradition says, “on this day the world was conceived and brought into being.” While we usually read the Torah portion about Abraham and Isaac, another option would be for us to read the beginning of the book of Genesis – of course the creation story – because this day is the quintessential day of beginnings.

Another powerful connection to Rosh Hashanah as a day of birth is the shofar. The Midrash likens its blasts to the cries of the pain and joy of childbirth. Could it be our own births we are re-enacting? And, having reconnected with such a powerful moment, we have the chance to imagine what we will do with this one, brief and precious life.

And then for ten days, Aseret Y'may Teshuvah - we practice living. In a perfect scenario, we model the very best our lives could be. For in the ideal we would use each of these days to try to do better, to be better. There are some organisms that do only live this long. One, two, five, ten days – can you imagine? Life goes by so quickly and this is the message to us each year as well.

And now, here we are in the last phase of our symbolic journey. If Rosh Hashanah is the day of our birth, and these past ten days have been the time we have lived our lives, then today Yom Kippur is a figurative rehearsal of our deaths. The imagery for this is everywhere. Today we do not eat or drink, we refrain from any manner of productive work as well as from intimate contact with those we love. Traditionally there would be no washing or bathing. These are the age-old customs of the day. None of them, you notice, are life-affirming.

On Yom Kippur we live out this simulation. We come as close to death as we can without actually dying. And then, as the day comes to an end, we realize that we have survived our own near-death experience. Now, having watched our lives flash before us over these 10 days - now, we see things from a new perspective.

(PIANO STARTS UNDERNEATH HERE)

The journey has taken us to a new place. We look backwards at the year that has past. We look forward and imagine what might be ahead.

Michael Singing:

*Let me tell you what I wish I'd known
When I was young and dreamed of glory
Do we have control
Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?*

Amy Speaking:

Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur.
10 days.
10 days to think about our lives.
10 days to imagine what could be.

Michael Singing:

Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?

Amy Speaking:

Aseret Y'mei T'shuva
We walk the path of our lives
We reflect on our year, our years!
What is the story we want told of us?

Michael Singing:

*Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?
Everybody tries to live their life as they should
Everybody wants to be remembered for good.
But when you're gone, who remembers your name?
Who keeps your flame?*

Choir:

*Who tells your story?
Who tells your story?*

Hamilton, the Musical - Perhaps you saw it on Broadway or heard its amazing music. Alexander Hamilton, one of our founding fathers, lived a remarkable and complex life in a short 49 years. Throughout the play we hear the words, "who lives, who dies, who tells your story." Just as throughout our High Holy Day journey, we are asked, what have we done with our lives? Did we make a dent in history? How have we helped someone else? What stories will they tell about us?

Only a few years after Hamilton died, a man lived who had an experience that gave him the perspective our tradition is trying to give to us today. His name was Alfred Nobel, the Swedish chemist after whom the Nobel Prizes are named. He invented dynamite and made his fortune by licensing governments to use this explosive for weapons. When Alfred Nobel's brother died, one newspaper accidentally printed an obituary for Alfred instead of his brother. In this premature memorial he was identified as the inventor of dynamite and the man who made it possible for armies to achieve new levels of mass destruction. Alfred was stunned to realize that his name would be forever associated with war and death. So he took his vast fortune and established awards in various fields that serve and benefit humanity. Having read his obituary in advance, Nobel gained the view we seek today. His life flashed before him and he saw his story written down in the history. As we are today, he was given the chance to change and it worked. Hardly anyone

knows that Nobel invented dynamite; instead we remember him as the man who created the awards that honor those who improve our world.

As Yom Kippur inches us towards a moment like the one that Alfred Nobel experienced, we might imagine what others would write about us and our lives. And then as the day comes to a close, our liturgy - our prayers and readings - say to us, "there is another year ahead and the pen is in your own hand."

Michael singing: *History Has Its Eyes On You*

I was younger than I am now

When I was doing the best I could

I had the hopes and dreams of a younger man

Trying to always do good

I made lots of mistakes

How will others remember me

And even now I feel the weight,

Knowing history has its eyes on me. (choir: Whoa, whoa... whoa)

History has its eyes on me (choir: whoa, whoa, whoa, yeah)

Let me tell you what I wish I'd known

When I was young and dreamed of glory:

Do we have control? Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?

I didn't always win

Still, greatness lies in me.

But remember from here on in,

History has its eyes on me (whoa, whoa, whoa...)

History has its eyes on you.

Yes, history has its eyes on us. History is watching and absorbing our story. Each year our deeds, our decisions, our words coalesce forming the next chapter in our metaphoric Book of Life.

I don't imagine that anyone here will have a musical composed about him or her. Maybe a biography will be published about a few of you. But all of us will surely have our story told – by friends, by spouses and children – around the dinner table, on long car rides, during wedding toasts. Yes, we are becoming the history of our family and our community. I know this to be true because nearly every week, our Bar and Bat Mitzvah students weave someone's story into the speeches they give from the bema. A parent, an uncle, a grandmother, a coach or a neighbor has touched them and inspired them and through some word or deed has put them on a path towards a meaningful moment. Yes, the future generations are watching. More than that, they are yearning to hear and take-in our stories.

My parents eloped on Christmas Eve in 1960. I love this story so much. There are so many layers to it. My mother rebelling against the grand wedding her parents would have hosted. The rabbi assuming she was pregnant. My father giving the tollbooth attendant a dollar for a 10-cent charge and telling him to keep the change. Their shared wedding sandwich at the Maryland House. They were married at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds and every time we pass it on 95 I tell this story and my children roll their eyes.

But of course this story is more than a fun tale. It has become part of the scaffolding by which my family holds itself together. And some day my children will tell this story to their children who may even have my parent's names.

Singers: Who lives who dies who tells your story?

It is not only about a wedding day and love and happiness, it is also a lesson in taking risks and forging your own path. This story and so many others become the lens through which we understand who we are and where we are headed. They give us purpose and meaning. They assure us that we are not alone because we belong to a story that began before us and will continue after us.

Judaism gets this. The longevity, endurance and success our tradition is based in this truth. Every Shabbat we read a story that provides us with direction and purpose. Every holiday we tell a tale that reminds us of the values that should guide our lives. Passover – freedom, Purim – identity, Chanukah – courage, Shavuot – love. And more, when done right these observances teach us that we are the newest characters in these unfolding narratives. That the next chapters of our personal and communal memoirs are being written now; though our choices, our deeds and our words. Yes, history has its eyes on us.

As we come to the end of our 10 day journey from birth to death, we pause to imagine what stories will be told of our lives. Is there an opportunity for a new narrative to be part of the coming year? What will it take to turn to a clean page and start to write the opening lines? Would this story be about a new dynamic in a much valued relationship? Perhaps letting go of some long-standing not-so-kind habits with a sibling? Perhaps a bit more tolerance for a child whose has chosen a path much different than what we envisioned for him? What about a change in your work status? Might you muster the courage to leave that job and start your own firm? Could there be a story in the coming year about making time for that good deed? About setting aside that extra hour you for someone else...

MUSIC STARST UNDERNEATH HERE

...someone who could benefit so much from you and your gifts? Only you know the story that you want written in the next chapter.

Choir: Our stories

CMS: Let's put ourselves back in the narrative (Our stories)

And stop wasting time on tears.

If I live another fifty years,

It's not enough (Our stories)

I have so much I want to do but there's so little time (They tell our stories)

I try to make sense of my place in this world that we live in,

*I really do worry that I'm running out of time,
I rely on my family
While they're alive they tell my story
When they remember my story, what will they say?
When they needed me most, was I right on time
I'm still not through
I ask myself, "What can I do since I have more time?"
The Lord in his kindness, may he give me what you always pray for, I need more time
I raise funds in DC for the poor and the homeless (She tells my story)
I speak out against hatred
I can do so much more if I choose to make time,
And when my time is up, have I done enough, will they tell my story?
Oh. Can I tell you what I'm proudest of? (My legacy)
I marched on the mall to defend human rights in our country;
I raised smart and independent children, I get to see them growing up (my legacy)
In their eyes I see I made a difference,
I see it every time,
And when my time is up, have I done enough,
Will they tell my story?*

(MUSIC CONTINUES UNDERNEATH)

Each year, really each day, is a chance to create a narrative that will live after us, anchoring our children, creating a scaffolding to secure the future of our families, inspiring someone we know – or maybe someone we don't know yet. Our journey from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur is a gift. We are taken by the hand and walked through our busy, complicated, less than perfect lives and what rise to the top are the stories that make life meaningful. In the coming year, may we author many stories, may they live on for many years, may they enrich future generations and may they make us proud.

Oh. We're on this journey we call life

It's only a matter of time

(Will they tell your story) time... (who lives who dies who tells your story) time...

(Will they tell your story) time... (who lives who dies who tells your story.)