

## Yom Kippur 5773: (Extra)ordinary Life

I got a bicycle for my birthday last year. It had been too many years to count since I had ridden regularly. I grew up in a small town; as a kid I used to hop on my bike to explore the rolling hills, dotted with cows and horses, that surrounded the Delaware Water Gap. As a teenager, riding my bike gave me a sense of freedom and escape—even if the only form of escape was to ride the 10 miles round trip to the heart of town—one stop light, one bank, one A&P grocery store, a pizza parlor and a Dairy Queen.

The bicycle I got last year had a different purpose: strengthen middle-aged knees. I didn't realize that it would also afford me a new kind of discovery, a different way of seeing local surroundings that I thought I already knew well.

Undaunted by rain or cold winds, I began biking a few times a week, every week—usually the same route through adjacent neighborhoods. I got to watch the seasons change, and caught sight of herds of deer doing their familiar free form landscaping work (or should I say damage) on people's shrubbery, early morning raptors making a kill and a blue heron grabbing breakfast on a nearby lake.

One day, though, on my comfortingly familiar route everything looked different. An ordinarily quiet residential area was filled with big trucks and some cars, what seemed like over a hundred vehicles covering both sides of several blocks. A large crowd was gathering in front of a home that I had passed often on my daily rides. I had noticed that I hadn't seen its owner in a long while, and that it had a quiet emptiness to it—and then, a few weeks ago, yellow tape in front of the door. I assumed it had gone into foreclosure.

“What's going on?” I asked a man on the way to the front lawn gathering.

“Estate auction,” he said.

“Really? This many people?”

“You better believe it. This is stuff you can't get at Wal-Mart. All kinds of collectibles and whatnot.”

“What happened to the owner?” I asked, “Foreclosure?”

“Died,” he said, “about six months ago or so.”

I stood and observed as the auctioneer started hawking things at a mile a minute. Boxes and boxes stood under a white tent. I watched as he held up what looked like a simple clear glass jar and the bids started coming. It began to rain heavily. As I turned and went on my way, more people were pulling up in trucks and cars to get a piece of the action.

The next morning I biked the same route again. This time the neighborhood was still. There was almost no sign of the pandemonium of the auction the day before – with the exception of some crushed plastic cups on the front lawn of the house, and a collection of soaked cardboard boxes of old books covered sloppily with an old tarp.

In that moment, I imagined the material contents of the man's home now disbursed into the hands of hundreds of complete strangers. I imagined objects that were part of the fabric of his daily life—maybe used to serve breakfast, collected as a hobby, bought as mementos of favorite trips, or given by family members—now making their way in those trucks to new places across the Carolinas: maybe into vintage stores or onto someone's kitchen counter.

The day before, all those objects had been assigned a starting price by the auctioneer, and a final purchase price by a bidder. These were based on the object's perceived usefulness, or beauty, or rarity. But the price at which an object can be bought and sold is often very different from its value. Objects become our “prized possessions” because they reflect a relationship—a gift given from friend or family as an expression of love; or because they remind us of an accomplishment; or because they are invested with meanings that express our values: a Kiddush cup or a tallit are precious because of what they represent far more than because of the weight of the silver or the weave of the cloth.

And standing there in front of the rain soaked boxes that were abandoned, unsold, I pondered... We often say, “You can't take it with you.” But once we are gone, what is of lasting value that we leave behind?

On Yom Kippur we confront our mortality, our fragility. It is also a time to ask ourselves, beyond leaving behind objects of one sort or another as an inheritance—or as items for an estate sale—what do we leave behind that is of lasting value? What will be our legacy?

On this Day of Judgment, here is a pop quiz, adapted from the writings of Mordechai Gafni. Although there are no prizes for correct answers, take comfort in knowing that you won't be docked points for incorrect answers, either. In fact, there's no need to raise hands or answer out loud. Ready?

Name, for yourself, the three wealthiest people in the world.  
Name the last three Academy Award Winners for best actor.  
Name the last three people who have won “American Idol.”

If you found those questions difficult, try these instead:

Recall three important teachers who helped you get through your schooling.  
Name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time.  
Name three friends who you have helped through a difficult time.  
Think of three people who have taught you something worthwhile.  
Name three people who have made you feel appreciated and special.  
I expect these answers came more readily than the ones to the first set of questions.

Although our culture tells us to do more, make more, get more, be seen by more people, get a bigger title, are these the accomplishments that are really lasting? They are ephemeral. If

we are lucky, they might be remembered while we are alive. What will last? The unique ways that each one of us can touch and shape another's soul.

At the shiva for Louis Landman, Ben's father, Ben spoke about him as a good man who had led an *ordinary* life. He cared deeply about his family, worked hard for the same company for over 30 years, and was active in his synagogue, in the Kiwanis service club, in community theater, and in the broader community. No Academy Awards, no Nobel Prizes. An ordinary life.

After learning of Lou's death, one of his former employees wrote to Ben's mother. Lou had mentored this man many years earlier, teaching him about the business in which both were engaged. After fourteen years in retailing, he felt called to enter the ministry. Here are a few excerpts of his letter to Betty-Ann, Ben's mom:

I begin... with a word of gratitude and with joy in my heart that God gave me an opportunity to cross paths with such a great man...

[In my earlier years in retailing] Lou was always there to challenge me to do better. He was always there to teach me how to achieve the best in every endeavor. And he was always tough on me when I gave him and the company anything less...

[One] of the many things I'll never forget, though, is Lou's pride in his buying staff. He stuck up for us, no matter what the issue. If we were called upstairs, he was right by our side, defending our choices... and complimenting our dedication.... He was truly our "shield and defender."

[There were nine months between the time I decided to enter seminary and the start of my first year.] I was deeply worried that when I made this choice known to management, I'd be fired... But when I told [Lou] of my plans... he... calmly, but very reassuringly congratulated me....

He never doubted my decision and he encouraged me every step of the way, wanting, more than anything, for me to pursue the call I knew I'd received... And on my final day at the office, well after five o'clock quitting time... he was the last one in my office.

About once or twice a year, every year after that, I'd hear from Lou... He wanted to know how I was doing in school, how people were treating me... He'd ask about my wife and my son... I'd truly made a friend, and considered him a very influential man in my life... He knew what I was capable of doing, and he was going to do all he could [to encourage me], in whatever small and insignificant – in whatever grand way he could.

An ordinary life, indeed. And one that had a profound, lasting impact on another man's life—which he carries forward now reaching out as a minister to hundreds.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, a great scholar and mystic and the first chief rabbi of Israel, wrote (3:221 Orot HaKodesh):

Every person needs to know that he is called to serve based on the model of perception and feeling which is unique to him; based on the core root of his soul. In that root—[in that essential essence of his soul] which contains infinite worlds, he will find the treasure of his life.

In other words, we each have a link to divine, a sacred soul imbued with qualities and abilities that are the way we are designed to reflect divine life. The essence of our journey is for each of us to make who we are a gift in the lives of others and in the life of the world.

The author, Isabelle Allende, writes movingly about her daughter's illness and coma at the age of 28. Allende took care of her in her own home until her daughter died in her arms in 1992. She writes of how after surviving this agonizing year and the numbness of grief that followed, her memories of her daughter helped her to see what was important in her own life:

Paralyzed and silent in her bed, my daughter Paula taught me a lesson that is now my mantra: You only have what you give. It's by spending yourself that you become rich.

Paula led a life of service. She worked as a volunteer helping women and children, eight hours a day, six days a week. She never had any money, but she needed very little. When she died she had nothing and she needed nothing. During her illness I had to let go of everything: her laughter, her voice, her grace, her beauty, her company and finally, her spirit. When she died I thought I had lost everything. But then I realized I still had the love I had given her....

Because of Paula, I don't cling to anything anymore. Now I like to give much more than to receive. I am happier when I love than when I am loved. I adore my husband, my son, my grandchildren, my mother, my dog, and frankly I don't know if they even like me. But who cares? Loving them is my joy.

Give, give, give—what is the point of having experience, knowledge, or talent if I don't give it away? Of having stories if I don't tell them to others? Of having wealth if I don't share it? I don't intend to be cremated with any of it! It is in giving that I connect with others, with the world, and with the divine.

It is in giving that I feel the spirit of my daughter inside me, like a soft presence.

We are about to chant Yizkor, and our focus shifts to how we carry with us the presence of those whom we remember. We reflect on their legacy in our own lives. And this day calls us as well to reflect on the legacy we want to leave. This is not, paradoxically a question about the future. It is a challenge for the present. At the end of the day the gates of prayer will be closing. The book of life is sealed with our signature. All of this is to create an urgency—to teach us the truth that the time we have is now. Yom Kippur puts before us the fleeting nature of our days. How shall we use them?

May the memories of those we whom we recall during this Yizkor service inspire us to live lives of meaning, lives of abiding value, and worth. May we find the courage to live with integrity—to nurture and to honor the unique gifts we each hold. To live with generosity, sharing these gifts so they touch the lives of others. And may we live with the security and deep satisfaction of knowing that when we do, we create a lasting legacy.

G'mar chatimah tovah everyone—to a good sealing in the book of life

Tzom Kal—for those who are able, may it be a meaningful fast.