

Live Your Life without Regret

For the Night of Kol Nidrei

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Once upon a time King Arthur called a special meeting of the Knights of the Round Table. From all across England, the knights were quickly summoned to report to the king. Soon the great Sir Lancelot appeared. Then Sir Galahad followed by Sir Gawain. Eventually all the other Knights of the Round Table arrived. Each and every one of the knights looked so gallant and swashbuckling and resplendent. All, that is, except for one. His appearance was disheveled and disoriented. As King Arthur looked around the round table he saw how poorly this knight looked compared to all the others.

So the great King Arthur turned to his chamberlain and said, “Chamberlain, can you tell me something?” And the chamberlain responded, “Of course, my lord.” So King Arthur went on: “Why is this knight different from all other knights?”

Mah nishtanah ha lilah ha zeh mikol ha lailot. Why is this night, Kol Nidrei night, so different from all other nights? What is it about Kol Nidrei that compels us to be here and no place else?

The prophet Jeremiah gives us an answer: “If people fall, can they not also rise? If they break away, can they not return? The stork in the sky knows when to migrate, the dove and the swallow know the season of return.” What human instinct knows the time to turn back? What cue sparks the conscience of the soul?

Kol Nidrei is for those with private pains and secret sorrows. It’s for those looking for ways to get back home. It’s for those in need of forgiveness. Is there anyone in this sanctuary tonight who does not yearn for inner peace? Is there anyone here who doesn’t crave a new and fresh start? Kol Nidrei is for all of us.

On Kol Nidrei night we must ask ourselves some hard questions about the past year: was there a real companionship with my spouse or was there a living together and a growing apart? Was there love inside my home or was the affectionate word to my children left unsaid? Was I there when my friends needed me? Did I keep

quiet when I should have spoken up? Did I acquire new insights or just new possessions in the past year?

On Kol Nidrei night, perhaps more than any other time, we are filled with thoughts of what might have been, could have been, should have been. At times, we are consumed by regret, anguished by what we did do and by what we didn't do. On our death bed, none of us is going to say: "You know, I wish I had spent more time in the office! No, we will wish we spent more time with our loved ones. We will wish we spent more time staying in touch with relatives and friends. We will wish we spent more time making a better world.

The problem is: we don't do it. We don't make the time. We get sidetracked by the daily grind. There are problems at work. There are bills to pay. There are lawns to mow. There are all sorts of distractions. We say we will get to the important things in life. But we don't. Because no one likes change, especially not inner change. So we tend to evade and to avoid the changes we know we need to make. And time flies by. And then it's too late.

Too late. I read a story that Bear Bryant, the famed football coach at the University of Alabama was once asked to do a television commercial for Southern Bell Atlantic. Coach Bryant's part in the commercial was simple. He had only one line. Bear Bryant was supposed to say, as if barking to his football players, "Call your Momma!" But at the actual filming of the commercial something unexpected happened. As Coach Bryant turned toward the camera, tears welled up in his eyes and he said, "Call your Momma. I sure wish I could call mine."

Oh -- to live a life from this moment forward without regret. Is that not our most fervent hope and prayer on this Kol Nidrei night?

If you have not already read it, I urge you to read famed author Joan Didion's powerful new book The Year of Magical Thinking.

On Christmas Day 2003, Didion's daughter Quintana fell ill with what seemed at first flu, then pneumonia, then septic shock. She was put into an induced coma and placed on life support.

Then, just five days later, Ms. Didion and her husband of 40 years, the equally noted author John Gregory Dunne, had just come home from the hospital and sat down to dinner in their Manhattan apartment, when Mr. Dunne abruptly slumped over and fell to the floor, dead of a massive heart attack.

Didion writes, “Life changes fast. Life changes in an instant. An ordinary instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.” Didion was stunned, as are we all, by the realization of how uncertain tomorrow is for ourselves and our loved ones. We imagine there will always be another opportunity for that kiss, that hug, that holding of hands. And so we tell ourselves “someday” we will spend more time with our spouses. “Someday” we will devote more time to our children. “Someday” we will forgive our elderly parents. But what if “someday” comes too late? The Talmud rightly and wisely cautions us: you never know which day will be your last. Knowing that life can end in just an “ordinary instant” what should we do? Rather than put our papers in order, it is far more important to put our priorities in order.

We must make time for those we love, never ever take them for granted, and always say I love you at least once every day. We must treat our loved ones as precious and dear. We must consider ourselves fortunate and blessed to have their company on the journey of life. Do you want to live your life without regret? Then you must discover in the brevity of life, a renewed urgency to embrace your loved ones with all your heart and soul.

Have you ever heard Valerie Cox’s delightful Dr. Seuss-like poem “The Cookie Thief”?

“A woman was waiting at an airport one night,
With several long hours before her flight.
She hunted for a book in the airport shops.
Bought a bag of cookies and found a place to drop.
She was engrossed in her book but happened to see
That the man sitting beside her, as bold as could be,
Grabbed a cookie or two from the bag in between,
Which she tried to ignore to avoid a scene.
So she munched the cookies and watched the clock,
As the gutsy cookie thief diminished her stock.
She was getting more irritated as the minutes ticked by,
Thinking, “if I wasn’t so nice, I would blacken his eye.”
With each cookie she took, he took one too.
When only one was left, she wondered what he would do.
With a smile on his face, and a nervous laugh,
He took the last cookie and broke it in half.
He offered her half, as he ate the other,
She snatched it from him and thought ...ooh, brother.

This guy has some nerve and he's also rude,
Why he didn't even show any gratitude!"
She had never known when she had been so galled,
And sighed with relief when her flight was called.
She gathered her belongings and headed to the gate,
Refusing to look back at the thieving ingrate.
She boarded the plane and sank in her seat,
Then she sought her book, which was almost complete.
As she reached in her baggage, she gasped with surprise,
There was her bag of cookies, in front of her eyes.
If mine are here, she moaned in despair,
The others were his, and he tried to share.
Too late to apologize, she realized with grief,
That she was the rude one, the ingrate, the thief."

Now what is the import of this poem? We deceive ourselves far more than we realize.

Many of the beliefs we dearly hold about ourselves – for better and for worse -- are, in fact, not true. Mark Twain once said, "I have been through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened."

What are some of these mythic beliefs, these self-deceptions? In childhood, more than a few of us believed that we were unattractive or unathletic or unintellectual or unlovable. We held ourselves back from joys and opportunities that could have been ours. To this day, that fills us with regret. As adults, more than a few of us believe that we are always right, always kind, always the innocent victim. We have been blind to our self-righteousness, our unkindness, the ways we bring plagues upon ourselves. Life has not gone the way we had hoped, people have not responded the way we expected, and we don't understand why. And that too fills us with regret.

Do you want to live your life without regret? Then we must develop the capacity to see through the myths we tell ourselves about ourselves and honestly recognize the truth. We must stop the game of deliberate self-deception. In the words of our liturgy, "We ask for honesty, vision, and courage. Honesty to see ourselves as we are, vision to see ourselves as we should, and the courage to change." Now I would like to suggest one more path to help all of us live a life without regret. And this path may surprise you because you have probably never considered it in this context.

The path is Shabbat, the Sabbath. The purpose of Shabbat is to infuse one day a week with everything that makes life worthwhile. Six days a week, we put up with our crazy lives. But one day a week, we live a truly ideal, perfect, utopian day.

That's what Shabbat is supposed to be – a day lived without even the possibility of regret. A day filled with quality family time and spouse time and rest that regenerates our souls; a day filled with time for connection with God and being with our Jewish community and studying Torah.

Why is Shabbat one of the Ten Commandments? Because Shabbat is the day when we seek to realize the fullness of our humanity: we love, we laugh, we give, we share. Shabbat reminds us that there is more to life than speed. And that we desperately need just to be – and to take a break from being money-making or money-spending machines. Shabbat is that day when we align ourselves in complete harmony with nature. Shabbat is one of the Ten Commandments because it is the guardian of freedom from the enslaving burdens and anxieties of our careers. Shabbat is the guardian of marriage and family life. On Shabbat, we pause to celebrate God's creation and what we have created and brought into the world – our children and our marriages.

Above all, Shabbat teaches us: I am more than what I own. I am more than what I do for a living. I am far more than how much money I make. My worth, my value, has nothing to do with any of these things. My worth consists in being a child of God, created *betzelem elohim* in the image of God.

Do you want to live your life without regret? Then start practicing Shabbat in a liberal, progressive way and your life will be transformed. For the way we rest is ultimately more important to God than the way we work.

The story is told of a big billboard advertisement put up on the freeway. It read: "Someone ought to do something." Within a few days, someone climbed up to the billboard, put a big X through the word "Someone" and above it, written in a big bold letter was the capital letter "I" -- "I ought to do something."

We cannot expect someone else to make our loved ones our highest priority. Each of us must do something. We cannot expect someone else to show us the truth of who we are and who we can yet be. Each of us must do something. We cannot expect someone else to transform the world through the spiritual practice of Shabbat. Each of us must do something. We have only one life to live. Let us

choose to live in such a way that we live life to the very fullest and with no need for regret. The past is over. The future is a mystery.

The here and now is all we have. This moment is a gift.