



## Senior Rabbi Ken Chasen

Yom Kippur 5779    September 18, 2018

“The Book of Your Life”

“Wake up,” she said into my phone. “The temple’s hills are on fire.”

It was 5:00 am. Pitch black outside. The call was from a congregant and dear friend who was already up and watching the news. Startled but very much awake, I turned on my television, and there it was – an aerial view of Leo Baeck Temple completely framed by fire. From the look of things, the temple’s buildings didn’t have long to last. So I told Allison to wake up our kids and prepare them for evacuation, since we live just two miles north of the fire. I was going to hurry over to the temple to remove our eight Torah scrolls before it was too late.

Not surprisingly, no matter how awake I may have been, I clearly wasn’t processing all that well, because it never occurred to me to ask a few reasonable questions of myself before racing out the door. What if the road is blocked by the police? What if I need help once I get there? Who should I ask? Is this maybe just a bad idea – to leave my family and drive *toward* the fire? None of that crossed my mind until I was already on my way – but then, it didn’t take long before the fire came into view, and everything in my mind was just consumed by overwhelm.

I had never seen a giant brush fire like that before in person – and I pray that I never do again. I could feel the heat from the mountains of flame beating down upon my car. It was astonishing. And frightening. I kept expecting that, at some point, I would have to convince first responders to let me through. Only as it turned out, I was the first responder. There were no police cars directing traffic. There were no fire trucks. I arrived in our parking lot, with the hills completely ablaze, and I was entirely alone.

I recall texting a quick “OMG” to Allison, but I don’t recall questioning whether I should actually enter the temple or just race home. I had come to collect Torahs, so that’s what I was going to do. So I pulled into the service entrance and made my way as quickly as possible to the sanctuary.

This room was orange – these windows filled with fire light. I grabbed two scrolls, one in each arm, and started to head toward my car. But quickly I figured out that I couldn’t safely do this one or two Torahs at a time – there wouldn’t be time – so I rolled a kitchen cart onto the bima and loaded all of the Torahs onto it.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... not eight. Oy. The eighth Torah scroll was clearly down at the Beit Midrash. I would have to try to rescue it as well. But first, I had to get these seven scrolls into my Chevy Volt. Perhaps if I had paused and thought for even a moment before leaving my house, I would have taken our minivan. But it was what it was, and fortunately, I did have the presence of mind to grab my family photos from my office – and, of course, this guitar. I didn't waste any time putting it into its case, mind you. I just threw it into the car with the Torahs, and then drove our fire lane down to the Beit Midrash, where I grabbed the last scroll and also pulled down from the doorpost the beautiful family *mezuzah* that Peachy and Mark Levy had given us to dedicate the building.

Incredibly, the fire was still only on the hills, not our buildings. And just as incredibly, I was still alone – not a fire truck anywhere to be seen. So I snapped a few quick photos on my phone, and took what felt like a long last look back at our campus, even though I'm sure it wasn't very long at all. I was certain I would see none of this ever again. I took that mental snapshot, and turned briskly onto Sepulveda Boulevard.

By the time I made it home, Allison and the kids were mostly ready for the evacuation order that was soon to come. The passports were all collected, the medicines all stashed in the car, along with a copy of our will. We grabbed as many photos as we could, especially the old ones that didn't exist in cyberspace. Wedding photos of our grandparents and the like. And then there were the irreplaceable mementos: Micah's first home run ball in Little League... Ben's *tallit* from his Bar Mitzvah... the two stuffed pink froggies that Eliana had slept with every night when she was a little girl. And a bunch of the drawings the kids had made for us when they were young. Whichever ones we could find, we took – and we were off.

The ensuing days of evacuation slowed things down and allowed for a little perspective – although not when it came to the news coverage of what had happened at the temple. “HERO RABBI DODGES FLAMES TO RESCUE TORAHS!” By the time I got through reading some of these stories, I felt compelled to check my body for burns. Hero rabbi? Idiot rabbi was more like it. And let's just say that the hero narrative played a whole lot better in the news than it did with my wife, who had received that “OMG” text from me, and then heard nothing more until I walked through the front door forty minutes later. The hero rabbi will not be winning any “Husband of the Year” awards anytime soon. But setting the news stories aside, being evacuated did create some meaningful perspective for us. Most of all, it gave us a chance to notice what we took – and what we didn't take – when we were forced to leave our home in a hurry.

Most striking, of course, was what we didn't take. That was, notably, things of significant financial value. Other than grabbing the documents that would make it easier to sort through the rubble of our lives, should our lives be reduced to rubble, there was essentially no focus on dollar value when we were in a hurry to select what mattered in our lives. The items we chose nearly universally would have held almost no worth whatsoever to anybody other than us.

We needed our grandparents' pictures because they were a constant reminder of our own story that reaches before and after us... and because they reminded us of what it felt like to be unconditionally loved as a little child. That's a reminder no one ever wants to surrender.

We needed Micah's home run ball because it held the story of hundreds of swings and misses – of exasperation at the batting cages, of balls that hit the wall but didn't quite go over, of never giving up until one finally did go over. That wasn't a baseball. It was the receptacle of our eldest son's lesson in perseverance.

We needed Ben's *tallit* because just looking at it put us back in the sweltering summer heat of Old Yafo, that ancient section of Tel Aviv with the winding stone roads and the shop where Gavrieli, the hand weaver who has sold so many of you your *tallitot* on past temple trips, sold a *tallit* to Ben. Whenever we look at it, the whole story unfolds – Ben's vision for his future, mixed with his then-adolescent belligerence, mixed with his childlike enthusiasm... that exhausting collision that is a human being at the age of thirteen. And all of it folded neatly inside a *tallit* bag needlepointed with love by one of our family's dearest friends. A whole lot of stories inside that wool and yarn and string. We had to have it.

We needed Eliana's froggies because they tell us more about who she was as a little girl – thickly in the thrall of pink, in love with little hearts and soft things destined to be loved softer – yes, they said more about who she was as a little girl than anything else. And the possibility of losing any of that from our memories, as she was hurtling into womanhood, was just too much to bear.

Put them all together, and an insurer might have given us a couple hundred dollars for their loss. But to us, they were everything, when we feared nothing might be left.

Many of you were forced into evacuation as my family was this past December, and I suspect that your stories and your choices were not all that different from ours. And not all that different from the choices I made while running frantically through this temple that fiery morning – grabbing our Torah scrolls and my family photos and the one guitar that plays the story of my life's travels... but not the artwork by Chagall and Escher and Ben Shahn. In the quiet of evacuation, as we watched the news and awaited our return home, I found myself pondering that intriguing truth: how it is, why it is, that we spend most of our lives obsessed with the accumulation and navigation of things that, when push comes to shove, actually don't matter to us much at all. And here, I'm not just talking about material things – but even, for lack of a better word, immaterial things: like some petty slight at the office... like the jealousy we feel toward a friend... like the relentless battle to hide any visible signs of our aging... like our anger over relatively small nuisances we allow to consume us... like fighting like hell to win the argument with someone we love.

When the fire was raging, I didn't care about all the expensive stuff. And I didn't care about whatever nonsense was bugging me at work, or my aging face or body, or my mostly pathetic irritations. And it was the very friends with whom I too often exchange judgments who were texting to ensure that I was okay.

And my family – for all that I belabor and bemoan and blame – my family was perfect and precious on the day when everything seemed at risk. Why, I wondered, can't it always be this way? Or at least more this way?

These *Yamim Noraim* – these Days of Awe – are supposed to help us get there. On Rosh Hashanah, I was approached by one of our worshipers after services, who asked, “What is the significance of the white robe you wear on the *bima*?” “Well,” I said, “this probably isn't going to be the sweet-natured answer you were hoping for, but the most common teaching about why we wear white on the High Holydays is that this robe, this *kittel*, is supposed to remind us of burial shrouds. We are supposed to be rehearsing our death on the High Holydays – feeling our mortality so deeply and so imminently that we might actually turn back from the worst in ourselves before it's too late.”

Apparently, we humans need that type of threat hanging over our heads to help us focus on what actually matters to us. It needs to feel like our whole life is on fire. That's probably why that harrowing prayer we recite each year, the *Unetaneh Tokef*, made it into the prayer book hundreds of years ago – and succeeded in staying there, even though we know with absolute certainty that life doesn't work the way the *Unetaneh Tokef* describes.

“On Rosh Hashanah it is written... on Yom Kippur it is sealed: How many shall pass on, how many shall come to be; who shall live and who shall die; who shall see ripe age and who shall not.” According to the prayer book, it's all decided and sealed right here on this day.

We don't even know who wrote those words that at once draw us in and repel us. Any number of legends have surfaced, but no one knows for sure. We do know that a copy of the prayer was found in the Cairo Geniza back in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, which means that Jews have been wrestling that theology to the ground for at least 1300 years, probably more. Wrestling with it, but not expunging it. Why?

Might it be possible that the very theological construct that repulses us most – that every shred of reason within us urges us to reject – is actually an old friend that we know we need. To keep us honest. To make us afraid. A good afraid. Afraid of dying.

A teacher of mine, Rabbi Irwin Kula, tells of a time when he was visiting one of those gadget stores you find in the airport terminal. The gadget that got his attention was a “personal life clock.” You type in your age, your gender and a few other answers to its questions, and it kicks back a ready-made computation of how long you are going to live. And then it starts counting. Ticking down the seconds of your life. Rabbi Kula was deeply unnerved by hearing the ticking of his life away – and there was little solace in the fact that his “personal life clock” offered the assurance that he had some 300,000 hours left to live. Because in his heart, he knew his “personal life clock” didn't know anything more than the *Unetaneh Tokef* knows. He might have 300,000 hours left to live. Or one, if his plane was about to crash. Or maybe 400,000 hours if he outlived the actuarial table that somebody computerized and placed inside that gadget. He had no idea. He only knew that he could hear the ticking down of his life, and it alarmed him.

It alarms all of us. It ought to alarm us. Because the only reason we afford ourselves the luxury of wasting precious time and attention on things that don't really matter to us is that we delude ourselves into thinking we really *aren't* going to die. Sure, we know we'll die – we just prefer not to think about it, and anyways, it's not happening anytime soon... we think. We can go back to obsessing about winning the empty games with which we fill up so many of our days. We can revert to the patterns we really dislike in ourselves – the ones we spend this one day staring at and swearing off. This one day, when death feels deep and imminent.

It's no coincidence that young Jewish adults have never been as attracted to High Holydays worship as their parents or grandparents are. After all, the topic of these days – “you really and truly are going to die, and it could happen at any moment” – is not something young people viscerally believe or can feel. And even for those, young or old, who can sometimes feel it – we usually try our best not to, because the feeling practically scares us to death. The Talmud tells us of Rav Nachman, who showed himself to his friend Rava in a dream after Nachman had died. With wonderment and a touch of dread, Rava asked: “Was death painful?” Said Nachman, “It was as painless as lifting a hair from a cup of milk. But were the Holy One to say to me, ‘You may return to that world where you were before,’ I would not wish to do it. The fear of death is too great.”

What is that fear about? The fear of the ticking away of our lives that plagued Rabbi Kula and Rav Nachman – and us?

I want to suggest this evening that the fear is less about the experience of dying itself, which we can perhaps imagine as Rav Nachman described it – as painless as lifting a hair from a cup of milk. The fear is of running out of time before we've built the lives we want to build, before we've created the kind of meaning we yearn to create. We fear that if we were forced to evacuate this life in a hurry, we might be defined by too many things that don't matter – not enough of what we'd want to grab and take with us... and leave behind as our legacy.

Back in October 1948, a young man stood before his classmates in rabbinical school and delivered his student sermon. He was only 27 years old, and this was his first attempt at preaching, so he had to be at least a little intimidated. But somehow, without the benefit of much life experience, he managed to offer a profound explanation of why we find it so hard to make our lives about the things that matter. He likened each of us, you and me, to Adam, the first human, whose life became hardest to harness just as he was beginning to sense his might. He had eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. He was filled with new power. He should have been on top of the world. But instead, he was plagued with fear and doubt. That is to say, he was a lot like us.

“The position of man today,” wrote the student preacher, “is somewhat akin to his ancient progenitor. Modern man, by virtue of eating of the tree of knowledge, has built a material world which surpasses the most fantastic utopias... and now in the moment of his greatest greatness, at a time when he seems to have gained his freedom... he, like Adam, feels his freedom to be a curse. In the process of advancement, he discovers that he had produced a world so vast, and so complicated, as to be wholly unmanageable. He had not eaten enough of

the tree of knowledge for he sees a world in chaos and cannot produce the light to interrupt it. His power over nature has reached his greatest proportions and yet he feels powerless in his individual life and in society. All of his accomplishments sit blushing in his face and a sense of futility overcomes him. He is powerless and afraid and would wish to hide himself if he could amongst the trees of his universe. And thus, he poses our problem, our challenge, and our goal: to find a sense of purpose, a sense of human dignity in the changed and different world in which we live.”

The young preacher was Leonard Beerman, who would become our Founding Rabbi. It was his first sermon. And even now, he lays out our problem, our challenge, and our goal: to find that sense of deep purpose in this changed and different world we’ve created... to make enough of what matters in our lives that we can leave this world, even if forced to do so in a hurry, and know that the right stuff is there to grab.

On this holiday, we spend a lot of time talking about the Book of Life – who will be written into it, sealed into it. I’m not so sure that book exists, at least not in the way we talk about it in our Yom Kippur prayers. But if you want to believe in a Book of Life – how about believing in the book of *your* life? Spend this Yom Kippur asking yourself: If my life was a book, how does it read? What’s really in it? What’s not? What takes up too much space? What’s lacking? Where does the story go astray? Is it true, this book of mine? Is it forgiving? Is it humane? And most important of all: Is this book as beautiful as it should be? As just as it should be? As contrite as it should be? As caring as it should be? Does it possess something transcendent, timeless, eternal? Because as is the case with any great book, if the story has been well and beautifully told – if the message is clear and elegant and memorable – it’s no great shame for it to end. You might not want it to end – but it’s okay... it can.

This is how we can beat the fear of death – how some of the most inspiring people I have known have beaten the fear of death. Often, I have been called upon to tell their stories – to sum up the content of the book of their lives. And always, the lesson shines forth: if you want to be ready to die, be ready to live... truly live... so that the story includes it all in proper measure. The mistakes are balanced with growing. The lies get blotted out by truth. The defeats become resilience, not regret. The values are both spoken and lived. And if, by chance, the end comes without warning – as sudden as a brush fire or a flood, an accident or a mistake, a heart attack or a stroke – might we live now, right now, in such a way that the book will be able to find its end?

Most of you know that just one month ago, one of our temple families suffered an unspeakable tragedy, when their son and brother Brian fell to his death while hiking in Oregon. He was only twenty-three years old. One moment, he was stretching himself to capture a moment of extraordinary natural beauty in a photograph; the next, he slipped, and his life was over. The injustice of it, the cruelty, is unfathomable. Brian was planning a life of service – preparing to help juvenile offenders rehabilitate their lives. He could have had no suspicion that his life would be tragically short. But anyone who reads the book of his life can see very quickly that he chose to live like it just might be short.

When Brian was just twelve years old, he wrote these words for a school project: “You can experience wisdom, but much appreciated is the tutelage of others... The world is a beautiful place. I will learn to tap into my warrior spirit, a pupil, always learning... The most profound words can come from the most fragmented soul... Life can be fun, but it’s not a game. Who can make a mark on the lives of others? Visiting old age homes, feeding the homeless, I am witness to the people, their smiles of unfaltering gratitude, and of the infection of a contagious disease called hope... I try not to be indifferent, morally obligated to be part of the solution. Ethics last a lifetime... I seek refuge in this irrefutable space in my mind, not to flee from the troubles of the world, but to help end them. *Before I leave this place forever,*” wrote twelve-year-old Brian, “I shall remember I CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.”

Let me tell you – I don’t believe for a second that Brian was somehow sealed out of some cosmic Book of Life on Yom Kippur last year. I believe he was hard at work on his own book of life, recognizing that none of us can know how many hours remain on our “personal life clock” – which is why his life message ended up so clear and elegant and memorable. It should have been a much longer book. But oh, what a beautifully written book it was.

The new year 5779 has arrived, and we are in it. We are supposed to live each day as if the fire is blazing – because it just might be. What will the book of your life read like... what will it include... if, in this new year, you choose to breathe in the great and awful truth that today might be all there is?

Live like the fire is about to consume you. Grab everything that is important, that matters. Leave the rest to burn. You don’t need it. And let the story you are meant to write be told.