

Yom Kippur 5784  
Rabbi David Englander

### **Bottom Up, Top Down**

On Rosh Hashanah I talked about some of the many unexplainable mysteries of our lives and our capacity to respond to them with awe and wonder. Today I want to start by sharing with you what I think are the three greatest mysteries that we face as human beings, and delve a little deeper into one that is relevant and applicable to every single one of us, as we find ourselves together as a Beth El family for this sacred day.

Mystery number one is why some people are born into an era of relative health, peace, and prosperity, while others have their one go-round on this earth in circumstances or in a time period that is ravaged by disease, war, or scarcity. For better and for worse, the time and place, the when and where come into this world, and the parents who welcome and raise us, is strongly determinative of the lives we will be able to lead. Of course some born into the most unwelcome circumstances of poverty, pollution, and dysfunction triumph and prevail, and many born with great privilege - not just financial but love and support and fresh air and some space to call home - fail to thrive for any variety of reasons. But generally speaking, it helps to be lucky not only in life but in birth - place, moment, parents, and on top of that family, community, education and opportunity. All people may be created equal but all people do not begin with equal advantages. Just how intense the effect is of something over which we have zero control is a mystery that can be explained only by God.

Serious, head-scratching mystery number two is stated quite simply and that is this: why are my New York Mets always so terrible? I mean, we spent, what, half a billion this year, only for a fire sale at the end of the summer? Did we finally have an all star reliever who broke his leg before the season started - while he was celebrating winning a game in the World Baseball Classic? Yes we did, because that's what we do. And to the few Jets fans at Beth El - I know you can relate. [Fly Eagles Fly. I'm contractually obligated to say that once per High Holidays.]

And number three, which I would like to explore with you on this holy day in this holy congregation, is not the way we come into this world, or our teams flailing, but something that I can say with full confidence that everyone in this room or any other has in common. Which is that, as a teacher of mine likes to say: nobody gets out of here alive. And the vastly different ways we can depart this world for whatever is next, range on a continuum from unspeakably tragic to if not easy then wholesome and even beautiful. Perhaps you have heard before that the rabbis describe a good death as being as peaceful as a strand of hair being removed from a glass of milk. Most deaths are somewhere in between, and I find that to be another of the astounding mysteries of existence: we have little to no control over where ours will land. It's hard to talk about, but as the rabbis like to teach in this and other circumstances, if not now, when?

Other than the sudden, and also untimely, passing of a loved one, which I know has been experienced with great pain by many in this room, there are two more common final approaches with which we are familiar. The first is best represented by a comment attributed to the brilliant and accomplished head of JTS through its largest period of growth through the 1950's and 60's. In his old age an obviously frail and mobility-challenged Professor Louis Finkelstein was asked how he was doing and he replied something to the effect that he was grateful God was taking him from the feet up.

"From the feet up" is a phrase that has stuck with me in the decades since I first heard that account from someone who knew him well. From someone who had seen Finkelstein in his prime, a force of nature for good, who was on the cover of Time Magazine and was quoted far and wide, whose first thought might have been poor guy, look how he has declined. Finkelstein, who I'm sure did not welcome his infirmity and all that went along with it, was able to see something different. In two words that we have to be careful not to overuse, 'at least' he was being taken from the feet up. He could think, talk, hear at least a little, learn, and share some of the wisdom he had accumulated over a lifetime. And he could express gratitude for all of it.

I actually settled on the idea for this sermon months ago, which is pretty far in advance, and it came from an off-hand comment about another worldwide powerhouse. If you had a longshot sermon bet on a mention of all-time tenor saxophone great Sonny Rollins, congratulations, you can collect your winnings - absolutely nowhere. So what's with Sonny Rollins? He taught an amazing lesson in an interview he did not so long ago. The interviewer, who clearly was not prepared, asked this colossus of a musician how often he plays his saxophone these days. And Sonny, calmly and without remorse, said oh I can't play anymore, my body doesn't allow for that. A somewhat flummoxed interviewer stammered a bit and Rollins reassured him saying 'hey that's gone now', but I have plenty of other things to do and think about. I'm ok, I'm fine.

For a lot of us if you take away the thing we are best at and even known for it is very difficult to pivot away from that loss. Which is why today I want to name something that is not so easy to hear and believe me not so easy to say but I believe it is the truth. That thing you can do today, that you spend a lot of time on and have dedicated yourself to becoming the best at it that you can possibly be? You might not be able to do that for your whole life. But also - don't stop doing that, because right now it is what you are called to do and part of who you are and why you are here. Our tradition teaches us to choose life, to choose our lives, and that means embracing our talents, building our repertoire, leading and working and building and sometimes even enjoying to our greatest potential. We should seek to improve at whatever that is, every day, until that is gone, until it is not possible anymore.

And we need to balance what we can do today but might not be able to do in the future with that which we will always be able to do, even if God takes us from the feet up. That means working on our inner lives so we can be at peace with our efforts to become the best version of ourselves we are capable of being regardless of capability or diminishment. Working on our relationships so that we can at least have a chance of expressing and receiving the love, friendship, and camaraderie that prove again and again to be the antidote to the single most critical feeling to avoid today and everyday and that is loneliness. And do you know what can help you with all of that? And even

better, that can be there for you on every stage of your life journey as your capabilities inevitably decline in some areas and improve in others?

It is what we are doing right now, right here. It is encapsulated in the scrolls behind me and represented in the tradition that they have led to, now three thousand years old. Your Jewish identity and heritage is not the only thing that you can continue to rely on if you are blessed with older age, but we can all affirm that it is something that we will have with us every day of our lives if we choose to. And it's not just something as non-specific as your "Jewish identity" that you will always carry with you. What can stay with you your whole life is more specifically at least four things: community, learning, prayer, and service.

Community - a commitment made by you and everyone here to engage and be engaged, as much as you are willing to, in an environment dedicated to the continuation of the Jewish story, which has always been accomplished much more effectively when we attach ourselves to something bigger than ourselves. The feeling that we are part of something that was here before us and will be here well after us is irreplaceably important and is something we can always contribute to and be a part of, no matter our unique or specific capacities, no matter whether we are at our strongest and most vibrant stage or at something less than that.

Learning - the chance to peruse or pursue Jewish knowledge, the likes of which fills library shelves and now servers or clouds full of invitations to delve as deeply or broadly into the sea of ancient and contemporary ink as you could possibly want. Even better, classes and speakers and a sermon every Shabbat and holiday that seek not only to inform but to connect you to something you can keep your whole life. Not every idea, fact, or even word of a sermon will stay with us. That last one is hard to admit. But the commitment to never stop learning, evolving, growing in mind and soul, this is portable, in every place and at every age.

Prayer - in the form of fixed services like these, hopefully always together at Beth EI but also anywhere around the country or Israel or most places in the world you find yourself, is a forever thing to feel at home with. Not only the services that we participate in together, and in which we are led so ably and beautifully, but also that inner prayer voice that says thank you to God for the blessings that remain, says please God for what it is we really need, says I'm sorry God for the ways that I should have tried a little harder this year, or this day. Prayer is a forever thing, in every place and at every age, including yours.

Service - the opportunity to turn outward to meet the needs of others, which can be done via the time honored irreplaceable tradition of tzedakah and also through time spent with others and calling, visiting with, or otherwise just saying "I'm thinking of you" to someone who would benefit from that. Beth EI has been and continues to improve on its obligation to be a place that serves and inspires service to others, through volunteerism within our synagogue that takes many forms, and encouraging time spent in service to others outside our walls which takes even more. We need to be a center for volunteerism for two reasons. Mainly because it is helpful to others and creates and builds a community we can continue to be proud of. And second because our younger adult generation is expressing their Jewish identity in many interesting ways, not all of which include sitting where you are sitting right now, but by entrusting their kids to our schools, committing to raising Jewish families, and, motivated in part by Jewish values, seeking to make a positive difference through effective volunteer work. We can be a place that provides the opportunity to express this aspect of our Jewish identities, and whether as the giver of our time or as the recipient of the time of others, it is a lifelong pursuit. It is yet another Jewish forever thing, in every place, and at every age.

All that is possible if God takes us, like he took Finkelstein, like God is taking Sonny, and like so many who you know or have known, from the feet up. What can we say about the even harder thing to talk about, to think about, to experience, and especially to witness in those close to us? What can we say to those being taken from the head down, who for a time know that they are slipping away from themselves? A time that

was described by Patti Davis, a daughter of Ronald Reagan and counselor to many who are or who love those who are in this kind of decline: “For the people losing their cognition, terror can be a constant companion, confusion nips at their heels, and they reach desperately for the person they once were.”

It’s not something we like to think about; even less to confront, yet most of us will. If and when we do, I would ask you to file away two very simple but important ideas, helpful, I hope, to caregivers and those in need of care. First is that if you have spent a life trying to give love and friendship to others in the way that you were able to do that, it is very likely that others will do that for you whether you recognize them or not, whether you recognize yourself or not. You are and you will be loved, you aren’t and you won’t be forgotten, you are known by others, you are known by the God Who created you, imperfect but still beautiful, still worthy. The first thing is: you are loved.

And the second is represented in a version of a story about a rabbi who is walking to shul on this very day and sees his congregant Shmuelik sitting and eating a sandwich. If you can stop thinking about sandwiches for a second, stick with me. And he says Shmuelik, did you forget it is Yom Kippur? No, says Shmuelik, I know it is Yom Kippur. Did you forget you aren’t allowed to eat on Yom Kippur? No, I know I’m not allowed to eat on Yom Kippur. Well then Shmuelik, if you didn’t forget it’s Yom Kippur and you didn’t forget that you aren’t allowed to eat on Yom Kippur then what happened? Well rabbi, I didn’t forget any of that, but for a moment, I forgot I was Jewish.

I am beyond thrilled and gratified that there are people who are not Jewish experiencing this service and benefitting from their connection to Jewish community and family, and I hope you always feel welcome here as we aspire to make sure that you will. But for most of us in this room or online, the second thing is: you are Jewish. And you’ll never forget for a moment that you are Jewish, that I’m sure of. No matter what we face in the future from the good to the bad and from the gains to the losses and no matter whether God takes us quickly or slowly or from the bottom up or from the top down. That will stay with you as an anchor and a foundation in an uncertain world, during the secure

and less secure stages of our hopefully long and accomplished lives. As irreplaceably important members of this community, together we will be informed by learning that never ends, uplifted by prayers that inspire, and enriched by acts of selfless service that help others in ways that can be measured and in ways that can be seen and recognized only by God. As a center of Jewish life Beth El has connected people to their Jewish journeys for decades and will for many to come. We will care and when the time comes we will allow ourselves to be cared for. We will always be Jewish, and seek to be worthy of that name, through the rest of this holy day and throughout this new year, please God in good health from the top down, and from the bottom up.

In a moment we turn to Yizkor, in sacred remembrance of those whose precious lives we recall on this holy day.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.