

Jewish Sermon

“Don’t Hang Up The Phone, It’s Your Covenant Calling”

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It was a little over a month ago; I remember the phone call quite well. I was settling into a comfortable position at my desk, reflecting on the holidays, thinking about what message I would offer this Rosh Hashanah. What fault would I force others to confront? What issue would I use to make the congregation squirm in their seats? And then the phone rang...on the other line was Judy Braslow, a member of our congregation who formerly worked with the United States Department of Health and Human Services in the Division of Organ Transplantation. Why was she calling me?

The voice on the other end said to me, “I want to talk to you about a professional issue.” Immediately I thought to myself, “Uh oh, what did I do now?” “No, no,” she assured me. I wasn’t in trouble. She was calling because she wanted me to give a sermon on organ donation. Had I thought at all about organ donation? And I must confess to you that only one thought went through my mind at that moment—hang up the phone. Suddenly, I didn’t want to be talking about this subject at this time.

Ms. Braslow told me about the thousands of people across America that are waiting for transplants. About the many, many who will die because there are an insufficient number of donors to meet the need. She shared with me that Jews were among the two group with the lowest number of organ donors, even though the strictest movements in Judaism permit donations in some cases.

She explained how there are many people who die tragically who would have wished to donate their organs to save a life but couldn’t because they never shared that information with their families while alive. Well, I was feeling pretty overwhelmed now and more than a bit depressed, and then to prove her point she asked me if I knew what my wife’s wishes would be if she were ever in an accident. And I quickly replied that it wasn’t the type of question one liked to ask his wife over dinner at the end of a long day. And then I was overcome with an even stronger desire to hang up the phone, to leave the problem alone, to make the question go away.

Explain to me how I can sit in bed and read about thousands of people dying in Rwanda and be disturbed but not really have trouble sleeping through the night, but I can’t discuss the topic of organ transplantation in the middle of the day without wanting to jump out of my skin. Somehow this is different, isn’t it? This is my life, my death, and who really wants to make decisions about that anyway? If talk we about it, then we make it real.

On Rosh Hashanah morning we read a strong and disturbing piece of liturgy, the prayer Unatenah Tokef, “Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day for it is awesome and full of dread... You, O God, are judge and arbiter... on Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed... who shall live and who shall die; who shall see ripe age and who shall not; who will die by fire and who by water; who by hunger and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague.”

What is this prayer, that tells us that God seals our fate this day? What do we make of this list of ways to die? And yet we know that we are lucky to be here. We all know people who have died in the past year. We are aware of the random nature of our lives. And the prayer Unatenah Tokef says yes, our lives are random. We don’t know who will live and who will die, so it is time to get serious. We have been given another chance. We stand here today alive, lucky to be alive, so what are we going to do about it? Hope that we get lucky another year or face up to the sacred responsibility that awaits us. This prayer reminds us that today is a day of decision, today is a day when we face the unpleasant, real decisions that we

avoid the rest of the year.

Now you're thinking, "Rabbi, it's Rosh Hashanah. Some of us are here with our children. What are you talking about? Organ transplants? Death? You're scaring my kids. Just tell us a nice story about the round challah and let us go eat a happy holiday meal."

There is a legend about King David, that when he was a young man he learned that he would die on a Shabbat. And what do you think his favorite ceremony was? Havdallah, the ceremony that marks the end of Shabbat. The legend tells us that David couldn't get to Havdallah quickly enough.

Isn't that a lot like us? We say to ourselves, "We made it to another year, we're alive and hopefully, Mazel Tov, L'chayim, let's give thanks and eat some brisket." But Rosh Hashanah is not thanksgiving, and we do not live only for ourselves. We live in covenant with, people who depend on us as we depend on them. Yes, Mazel Tov, congratulations to all of us, we've made it to another year, but now it's time to get serious. It's time to face up to some major decisions, it's time to honor our role in the covenants we have made with our many partners in life. These high holidays are called Yamim Noraim in Hebrew, Days of Awe. We need to use this time to successfully avoid the rest of the year.

And organ donation is a great example. Too often when asked about this issue we hide behind the answer that we don't think Jewish law allows that. But rather than pursue and study if this is true, we hide behind a vague answer that we think is true. In reality, there are many different opinions on this issue. But for the majority of Jews in America, there is agreement that organ transplantation is permitted to some degree when the saving of a life is involved. Pikuach Nefesh- the saving of a human life- is one of the most urgent Mitzvot in Judaism, and based on the statistics, you can rest assured that anything taken from you will be used to save a life. While organ donation makes us uncomfortable and forces us to think about what we want done to bodies when we die, the truth is that it may be the closest thing we have to immortality. A part of us living on in the body of another person who has been given a miraculous second chance. And who knows, maybe one of us or our loved ones or friends will one day find themselves on the other end, surviving only because someone else had that conversation with a loved one in advance and said to him or her, "These are my wishes if something ever happens to me."

What about living wills? How many of us know someone who said in their lifetime, "If I were ever in a coma, I would want to die," only to later end up on a respirator, placing a burden on their family they desperately wanted to avoid. All because they didn't really discuss the issue properly with their family. It is amazing how you and I can worry about car pools and seat belts and other day to day safety details while we drive around with the future of our families in our hands. Because if, God forbid, something happens to us and our families don't know what to do, we will burden them financially and emotionally in ways that could ruin them for the rest of their lives. We warn our children about drinking and driving, and we beg them to behave cautiously. Then we proceed to drive around every day with unresolved issues that are just as dangerous to the security of their futures.

There are so many issues to be discussed, so many important decisions to be made. How have we managed to avoid them for us long? We put away money to help out those we love when we are gone, we take out life insurance policies, but how many of us have bought a cemetery plot? How many of us have confronted that terrifying reality of our own mortality and saved our own family thousands of dollars in the future? A future in which we will not be around to help out.

I recently read about a 22-year old woman who had made clear to family her intention to be an organ donor. It seemed unusual for a 22-year old to have such a deep awareness of her own mortality and the foresight to deal with it. Little did she realize just how soon her own life would end. She was killed in an accident, and her heart was given to a man who had been waiting four years for life-saving surgery. He was running out of time, and her gift kept him alive. The man who received her heart was her father.

We have the power to help the world, we have the power to help our families, but we won't help anyone if we don't talk about the decisions, if we don't make them real. When you put down the prayer book and leave this building, talk about these issues, make them real. On your way out, there are pamphlets on

organ donation. Take one, read it, discuss it with your family or friends. It will offer clear answers to any of the questions you may have. There is another book printed by the UAHC called "A Time to Prepare." It is about living wills and funeral arrangements. It has forms and information to help you understand anything you may be unsure about writing a living will. It will make you uncomfortable now, but it will help your family later. Call us at the temple, tell us you want one and we will order it for you.

It's time to talk about these things. It's time to make them real. Let's face it. How many of us had moments in the last few years where we were worried about our own health? Where we had a real scare? And yet what have we done about it? If had a car that broke down in the desert and I didn't have AAA or other protection, wouldn't you expect me to purchase some as soon as possible afterwards? And yet, you and I keep living our lives on borrowed time, and we're not purchasing the proper insurance, we're not making another year. It is time to face our destiny while we are healthy. I know that this is painful, and I'm not trying to tell you what the right decisions are in each of the cases I have mentioned, but I know that we have to start asking the questions, we have to start making the decisions.

When I came home from that eventful phone call with Judy Braslow, I was very excited. I was fascinated by my reaction to our conversation and thought I had the makings of a great Rosh Hashanah sermon. I explained all this to my wife, Mimi. And when I was done, she looked at me cautiously and said, "So, are you going to make some big decisions NOW?" I quickly answered, "No, No, I have to write this sermon first. I just wanted to let you know what I was going to speak about on Rosh Hashanah."

I know that these are not the easiest things to talk about, and I do not know what my final decision will be, but I do know that the time is coming when I must ask the questions. It is a covenant I made when I agreed to marry Mimi, and I intend to honor it. On this Rosh Hashanah, may we all find the strength to fulfill the covenants that we made with our loved ones, may we find the courage to make the decisions that cry out for a response. AMEN.

SEOPF/UNOS. *Organ and Tissue Donation: A Reference Guide for Clergy*. 4th Ed. Cooper ML, Taylor GJ, eds. Richmond, VA:UNOS; 2000.

