

“The Trial of Our Lives”
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Have you ever woken up in a panic hours before your alarm was set to go off? I did this morning. My stomach was already in knots. The realization came to me that my trial is not as far away as I once led myself to believe. To be honest, I have not spent much time in a courtroom, but I imagine my hearing room will be infinitely more intimidating than any other experience of my life. I will endure an exhaustive direct examination and likely an excruciating cross examination. Evidence will be presented of what I’ve said and done. Even the words of text messages and emails I have sent and long since forgotten could be brought forth. There is no hiding from my past. This will be the most important case of my life and tonight, I pray from the depths of my soul, that judgment will be declared in my favor.

The truth is we are all preparing for the most serious trial: the trial of our lives. Yom Kippur is a rehearsal for our day of death. On this day, Orthodox Jews even wear a *kittel*, the shrouds in which they will literally one day be buried. Tonight on Kol Nidre, all of us are meant to stand shaken and solemn before God, the Ultimate Judge, and account for and defend our lives. Some of you may not believe in the image of God as Judge. Yet we should make no mistake our lives will be judged, if not by God then by man.

In lawyer’s language, our trial will be a bench trial or a trial solely by the Judge. There will no jury and no appeal. While no two judges run their courtroom in the same way, we have a general sense of how our judgment day will unfold. Through the Talmud and later Rabbinic teachings, God has given us seven questions we will be asked after we die.¹

As we stand in that awe-filled courtroom on the day of our death, we will first be asked: **“Were you honest in business?”** (Shabbat 31a)

Did you fudge numbers in your favor on your tax return? If you are a doctor, did you order an unnecessary test or prescribe a medication because of a relationship with a pharmaceutical company? If you had domestic help, babysitters or a housecleaner, did you pay them fairly? Whatever your profession, were you honest in your transactions – your business expenses, your fees, your paying of debts in a timely and responsible fashion?

I will never forget a story I once heard of a famous German Rabbi, I think it was Leo Baeck, leaving his home for the last time before being deported to a Concentration Camp. He left all his bills neatly on the table, paid for, and in stamped envelopes. Though he lived in an unethical

¹ Wolfson, Ron. *The Seven Questions You’re Asked in Heaven*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2009.

world in which the Nazis stole wealth, lives and a sense of faith in humanity, Baeck did not absolve himself of acting ethically. As Hillel taught, “*B’makom shayn anashim, hishtadel l’hiyot eesh* – in a place where people are not acting with humanity, strive to be a human being.”

Upon our final breath, we will be measured not by the standards of the society that surrounded us, but by God’s standards, by the highest standards of our faith. Our ethics are our essence no matter what the domain.

As anxious defendants, we breathlessly await God’s second question: **Did you busy yourself with procreation?** (Shabbat 31a) This question catches us by surprise because on its face, it seems to be of little consequence. We all know the Biblical commandment, “Be fruitful and multiply.” (Genesis 1:28) Now of course, none of us have taken this literally. How many amongst us have ten children?

In Judaism, the question’s essence is not about the number of children to whom we gave birth but whether we helped to raise and educate children. Did we pave the way for the generation after us? Did we leave a legacy?

My friend Rabbi Ariel Friedlander opened a most powerful sermon on infertility with a scene from the 1939 version of “Goodbye Mr. Chips.” In the movie, friends and colleagues gathered by the deathbed of a beloved schoolmaster, who, after the death of his wife in childbirth, devoted his entire life to his school. One of them comments sadly, “Too bad he never had any children!” To which Mr. Chips, hearing the comment, raises his head from the pillow and with his remaining strength responds, “But I did. Thousands of them. All boys!!”

My friend Ariel ended her sermon saying, “I should only be so lucky to be surrounded on my deathbed by friends and colleagues. If one of them should comment, ‘Too bad she never had any children!’ I hope I might raise my head and respond, ‘But I did. Hundreds of them. All Jews!’”

At the end of our days, may we be able to say we had lots of children – children we watched over and supported, children we taught. When we stand before God in the concluding courtroom of our lives, may there be somewhere in the world the voices of those who rise up in our defense – children who may even now be adults, who speak the words we taught or live the values we imparted. It is of no consequence whether those children bear our genes. May the Judge before whom we stand be swayed to see that we did not live selfishly for the moment, but planted and toiled for the future.

As we take a sip of water and catch our breath, the next line of questioning comes forth - two inquiries at once. **Did you set time for learning? Did you seek wisdom and understand one thing from another?** (Shabbat 31a)

Socrates warned long ago that the unexamined life is not worth living. With so many media distractions filled with sound bites and streaming information, we run the risk of passing through

our days in unawareness. Our lives gain greater meaning and depth by learning from the wisdom around us – from history and literature, from fine art and film.

As we begin to answer God’s question by highlighting our literary pursuits and the extensive secular books we have read, we sense Divine disappointment. We didn’t study God’s books. We didn’t seek the deep wisdom of our faith. We squandered thousands of years of Jewish teachings bequeathed to us, so much of which is now a mere Google search away. Our Reform movement even has a daily Ten Minutes of Torah that could have been sent straight to our laptops.

Our heart begins to race. Our mouth becomes dry. We know we stand guilty on this count. Our Jewish illiteracy is patently evident. How many in this congregation have read the Torah outside the sanctuary? Many of us do not even have the text in our home, let alone have considered making the Talmud a part of our personal library. We have lived our lives with folly, blindness, ignorance and arrogance thinking that we had all the answers inside ourselves and in our secular world for living our lives well.

The enormity of our mistake becomes evident at this moment. This entire trial is about the Judge of all Judges holding us accountable to the code of living righteous lives – and we do not even know the laws by which we are meant to live. As our shame sets in, we pray we can find merit on other fronts.

God calls to us with a fifth question, “**Did you hope for salvation?**” (Shabbat 31a). Perhaps now we can tip the scales of justice in our favor.

The book of Ecclesiastes opens by acknowledging the danger of despair: “Utterly meaningless!” Says Ecclesiastes, “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!”²

Without meaning, hope or God, the sacred text teaches, life is without purpose.

To be a Jew is to live with hope. Israel’s national anthem, *Hatikvah*, means “the hope.” Our homeland embodies our Jewish people’s unending and unyielding audacity of hope, our chutzpah of hope. Even in the darkest of days, we assure the world that light will come. We have worked continually to create a messianic time, not only with our prayers but with our actions.

To be a Jew is to live with hope. To be a Jew is also to give hope. The most powerful lesson I learned from my courses in pastoral care, was “never take away hope,” even though through the course of an illness, the patient’s focus of hope may change. Studies have proven that those who have faith and hope in the face of an illness live longer.

² As translated by New International Version. Other translations of the Hebrew words “*hevel hevelim*” include, “Utter futility!” (Jewish Publication Society) or “Utter vanity!” (New American Standard Bible, St. James, English Revised Version, and many more).

In the final trial of our lives, God shows us scene upon scene of opportunities to live with hope or give hope – occasions to visit the sick, to feed the hungry, the lift up the fallen, to see the seeds of the positive that can be sown even from life’s greatest hardships. Did we embrace them or did we pass them by?

As we wipe the sweat from our brow and take a deep breath, God asks us an easier question about our appreciation of what we had. **Did you deny yourself permitted pleasures?**

As the Rabbis of the Jerusalem Talmud put it, “A human being will have to give account for all that his eye beheld and he did not eat.” (Kiddushin 4:12)

I think this would make an ideal refrigerator magnet! My father, of blessed memory, knew and lived this dictate of enjoying permitted pleasures so fully, that we had to put a lock on the freezer to keep him away from the cookies.

So long as it is not detrimental to our health, we are meant to enjoy God’s garden, the earthly pleasures – the culinary cuisine, the landscapes of continents far and wide, the sounds of oceans and symphonies and rock concerts alike.

The notion of having and fulfilling a “bucket list” answers this awe-filled question. We have Beth El congregants of every age with such checklists of things that they want to do before they die. An eleven year old boy, C.J., has his bucket list stuck to his refrigerator. He yearns to catch a baseball at a baseball game, go on a helicopter and watch a scary movie. A thirteen year old, Liana, has a trip to Paris with her grandmother on her list. The bucket list of her dad, Steven Gainsboro, who is fighting a life threatening illness, has become more real:

- Riding a farmer's tractor - done
- Flying in the cockpit of a plane - soon to be done
- Sitting with the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra during rehearsal - to be done on September 22
- Jumping out of an airplane - “Not happening!” says his wife

Holly told me, “Here I am with him facing a most serious illness, and I am worried about him getting hurt.”

When we stand at the threshold of life’s door, God will ask us, “Did you look up and look out at my beautiful world? Did you see my Alps? Did you appreciate the gift of life that I gave you?”

Those of us who are workaholics risk failing even on this most simple of God’s tasks. Imagine being on the animal-filled plains of Africa or on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific and looking down at our Blackberrys rather than out at God’s most majestic creations.

To show God's leniency, God's last line of questioning is more basic. "**Were you your best self?**" (Meshulam Zusya of Hanipoli)

In our final appeal to God's graciousness, we are allowed to show God our strengths.

God does not expect us to be Moses or Martin Luther King, Jr. God does not expect us to be Miriam the prophetess or Mother Theresa. God expects us to be our best selves - to live the holiness code of tomorrow afternoon's Torah portion in our hearts and in our lives.

We each have been created in God's image. We each have been given gifts by God to bring into the world. Now is our time to show God how well we have used those gifts for good.

Tonight we stand in fear of our ultimate trial. We have failed to live righteous lives. Tonight, we approach God's Judicial bench pleading to be given another chance – to be written in the Book of Life.

Like the gavel of justice, the shofar blast calls us to order: pay attention, listen, heed the lessons of this day!

"As you enter another year, remember that all your acts will be presented before Me," says God.

Every text message you send, every insensitive word you speak, every impatient turn you take on the road, every selfish act you do will come before Me, on one hand. You will be held accountable not only for your sins of commission but for your sins of omission – for failing to show dignity to the homeless person on the street, for failing to give of your time and resources to support your community, for failing to speak out in the face of a discriminatory comment or act of bullying. You will be held accountable for your years of adolescent ignorance and for your years of young adulthood and being focused on your own personal and professional climb rather than reaching out to others.

"I will consider, as well," says God, "Every act of loving kindness you do, every word of prayer that you utter, every letter of love that you write, every life you lift."

"In My deliberations," says God, "I will weigh strongly the *tzedakah* you give, the meals you make, the hands you hold."

On the scales of God's justice, your mitzvot make a difference. Your mitzvot strengthen the case of your life.

Seven questions are given so that we can prepare. Seven questions that we can answer every single day with our actions regarding honesty in business, educating children, educating

ourselves by studying our sacred texts and applying its wisdom to our lives, living with hope, enjoying the small and big permitted pleasures of life, and being our best selves.

“Do not wait to until the eve of your trial to prepare,” says God, “Do not wait for that moment when you will become aware that your last year, or your last day, or your last breath is potentially upon you.”

Tonight is Kol Nidre. A moment filled with awe and dread. We are given twenty-four hours to ponder how our lives will be judged.

Tomorrow night is Neilah. A moment filled with relief. With the shofar’s blast our courtroom will be adjourned, with no verdict returned. Our trial will be postponed.

Adonai, Eloheinu Avoteinu v'imoteinu, Adonai, Our God, God of our fathers and mothers, *Melech al kol haaretz*, Supreme Judge of the entire world, on this day, judge our lives with your attribute of mercy for we have failed on far too many counts. Judge us for righteousness, for goodness and for life. Give us another chance, another year to get it right, so that when we breathe our last breath and our ultimate day of judgment comes, we will be able present a stronger case before God and before man. Amen.

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