

KOL NIDREY SPEECH TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 22, 2015

The In-Between

by Rabbi Aviva Goldberg

My routine, my custom, if you will, is to think about the themes of my High Holy Day sermons many months before the actual date. I don't really make notes but rather process in my mind what it is I would like to talk about.

And this year as in the past I **had** chosen many weeks ago my themes and sources for this evening's talk.

But this past Thursday, a wonderful event took place in the life of my family and it stopped me in my tracks.

How could I speak of existential themes as I had planned, speak about the human condition, indeed speak about the shortness of life when just six days ago our beautiful, healthy and miraculous second grandchild, our first granddaughter was born.

And so I considered changing this talk – until I realized that in fact the miracle of birth and the inevitability of death, and most importantly, the in-between all fit together and are appropriate for this sermon.

This long day of Yom Kippur, beginning this evening and ending tomorrow evening, is considered by some in our tradition to actually be about death and birth. As Rabbi Irving Greenberg writes “on this holiest of holy days we re-enact our own deaths only to be reborn at the resolution of the day, to be reborn at the sounding of the shofar.” For it is during this deathlike day that we truly contemplate our actions of the year, truly consider our mortality, a day to see the world as receding and be set free to focus on uncovering the essence of our lives.

Several times within these services we say a prayer called the *Viduy*, the confession. This is the same prayer that is recited at the time of death. We ask on behalf of the person dying that they be forgiven for their actions, and most importantly that they forgive and release themselves from any hurts or wrongdoings that they may have done consciously or

unconsciously during their lives – similar words to those we recite this evening and tomorrow.

Interestingly as well, many Jews go to the *mikvah*, the ritual bath before the start of the High Holy days. Immersing themselves in its waters they say this prayer: *“May I be open to the possibility of forgiveness. May my entry into these waters mark my intention to forgive myself, forgive others and ask others to forgive me.”*

The *mikvah* experience, to paraphrase the words of Rabbi Sara Luria, is a most intense one, for with nothing between us and the water, she writes, with no barriers no pretension, we are naked like the moment we were born.

Seven and a half years ago I attended the internment of my mother-in-law Helen Rosen in Israel - this past November I witnessed the birth of my grandson Ethan. Juxtaposing these two experiences, I have come to realize most profoundly this reality, that there are profound similarities between the beginning of life and the beginning of death.

At a burial in Israel there is no casket. The deceased is wrapped in a shroud, and two individuals gently catch the body as it is placed into the grave, holding it briefly as it leaves this world.

How wonderful, how parallel is this to a new child caught by welcoming hands and gently placed in the arms of loved ones as it enters into this world.

Yes, the Day of Atonement is a day of death and birth. I think most importantly however that it is a day of acknowledging the in-between: the in-between of birth and death - the vagaries of fate, the realities of our behaviours and the wants of our relationships.

To paraphrase the words of the main character in Donna Tartt's masterpiece *Goldfinch* - even when we are not always so glad to be here it's our task to immerse ourselves anyway – to find and celebrate the middle zone – that “rainbow edge where beauty comes into being - the space where all art exists and all love.”

I cannot explain this middle zone more beautifully than the author when she exquisitely describes it as being, like music “the space between notes . . . like stars which are beautiful because of the space between them, like the sun which strikes raindrops at a certain angle and throws a prism of colour across the sky” – this writes Tartt, “is the space where we exist and want to keep existing – [where often] despair strikes pure otherness and creates something sublime; sorrow inescapable from joy.”

The modern *Mussar* or Jewish ethical movement approaches our existential journey through life as a journey of the soul. We are, they write, “incomplete, and broken”. As our sages said, “pain and joy are interlaced with one another” – It is however how we find joy in that in-between space that is the key to our liberation.

Six months before his death this past August, the brilliant author, and neurologist Oliver Sacks, who if you will pardon the pun ‘awakened’ so many of his readers to the beauty and the intricacies of the human mind, wrote several articles in the New York Times. Sacks, described in the

Guardian as a man who understood the importance of the personal and the human with deep insight and empathy, wrote what could be considered his own eulogy in one of these articles entitled “My Own Life: On learning I have terminal cancer.” Sacks noted in this piece that he was a man of “vehement disposition, with violent enthusiasms and extreme immoderation in all passions.” And he continued, “I want and hope in the time that remains to deepen my friendships, to say farewell to those I love and to achieve new levels of understanding and insight.” “This will involve” he stated, “audacity, clarity and plain speaking in trying to straighten my accounts with the world.”

Though these in themselves are brave and honest words, it is his final paragraph that most touched me. He said “I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved. I have been given much and I have given something in return. Above all, he concluded, “I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful planet and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.”

Sacks was a unique, quite incredible individual. Though many of us admire him, we also know that much as we would wish to, we cannot necessarily accomplish all that he did in his life nor would we be able to emulate his attitude towards his death.

In this respect I am rather a cynic or perhaps a realist. I do not see the world through rose coloured glasses – quite the contrary. I know too well in my very being that again to paraphrase the words in the novel *Goldfinch*, there is within all of us a loneliness that separates us, that separates every living creature from every other living creature.

I know that life can be at times for many people excruciatingly difficult, insufferably trying. I know that dis-ease of the body, of the mind, of the soul is often inescapable for many. Despite this knowledge, however, I hear echoing in my soul the words of my mother, a woman who bore her chronic illness of over eighteen years with incredible fortitude and courage. Who when asked “how are you doing Marie” would, whether walking with a cane, sitting in her wheelchair or lying in her hospital

bed, simply say, “Well, I thank God for small mercies.” And though, I have tried to live my life with this kind of attitude – I have, unfortunately more often than not, been unsuccessful.

It is said in the story in the Torah that the souls of David and Jonathan their *nefashot* ‘knit together.’ They had in their relationship the experience of recognizing, truly recognizing each other: an emotional and direct experience.

Perhaps this is a part of the essence of the in-between – the ability, the potential we all have to seek and find joy and real connection in relationships, in friendships, in love.

Perhaps on this day of Yom Kippur, a day in which we are charged with contemplating life and death we should truly look at the in-between - how we live that space that separates our having being caught by welcoming hands as we entered into this world and that space when we will be let go by equally welcoming hands as we leave this world.

May we spend these twenty four or so hours considering how we are living our lives, how we wish to live in this infinitely small space in time within the immeasurable existence of earth, so that we can make the changes we need to make, repair the relationships we need to repair and give gratitude for the many gifts, the small mercies, if you like, that we have been given.