

Rabbi Michael A. White  
Temple Sinai of Roslyn, New York  
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Yehudah Amichai is Israel's most cherished Modern Hebrew poet. This work is entitled "Almost a Love Poem":

If my parents and your parents  
hadn't emigrated to Israel in 1936,  
we would have met in 1944  
there, on the platform at Auschwitz .  
I at twenty,  
and you, at five.  
Where's Mammeleh?  
Where's Tattleleh?  
What's your name?  
Hannaleh.

These haunting words transport us back in time to a world of catastrophic choices. What if our families had each made the seemingly "safe" choice of just riding it out, of assuming that Hitler was just a passing nightmare? What if our parents hadn't made the daring, risky journey to Israel? Then we'd have met at Auschwitz instead of Tel Aviv, you and I.

Maybe leaving wasn't an option. Maybe we had no one to sponsor us. Perhaps the British stood in the way. Or maybe your parents were ill, or poor. Then, I at twenty, and you, a small child, alone and terrified asking, "Where's Mammeleh?" would have passed through the gates of hell, together with the multitudes, a step away from extermination.

Amichai's poem points to the limits of human mastery. To how little control we have over our destinies. To life's capriciousness and its fragility. To seeing daylight one day and the dark smoke of mortal fear the next. Amichai's point is that life sometimes throws body blows at us, some more searing and painful than others. Yet, we are here; we are alive, you and I. Hannaleh's parents made it to Israel, somehow. Amichai's poetry continues to inspire. And so, despite the dark times we may have faced, we should be grateful for today.

Amichai's poem mirrors Yom Kippur's imagery. The Book of Life and the Book of Death are opened. Which book will include our names is still a mystery. Yet Yom Kippur's language, like Amichai's beautiful poetry, isn't designed to scare like some twisted fairy tale. Quite the contrary. The message of this sacred day is that although there is a

much that we cannot control, and although tomorrow is a mystery, we can still grab hold of life's blessings, of its gifts, its beauty.

Just prior to the beautiful Kol Nidre chant this evening, we read a selection from the Talmud that begins: *For transgressions against God Yom Kippur atones*. So there is much discussion in the commentaries regarding what constitutes a sin against God. And, of course, the catalogue includes violation of Shabbat and kashrut. Ignoring Torah study and the holidays. Emmanuel Levinas, a French philosopher, has written that the Talmud says that despair, giving up hope, is also a sin against God.

Think about that. When life feels like a hurricane, when the rising sun brings fear and even pain, we are forbidden from thinking that all is lost, even then. That there can never be health, or joy or blessing again.

No, we cannot control the circumstances of our fates. So many among us have been gripped by upending, devastating events. And without warning all seems lost and terror swirls all about. And yet we are taught that even at those times it is forbidden to give in to despair. Because no matter the challenges, there are sources of strength out there--- true blessings out there. A lover's touch. The strength of embraces from family and good friends that absorb the fear. A gifted physician's ferocious search for a cure. A friend's remark that brings forth laughter when you thought you'd never laugh again. Or, when lost in your own thoughts, feeling so alone, you suddenly feel another hand take your own, and you realize that you are not alone.

Victor Frankl knew something about the tendency toward despair. A psychiatrist by training, he and his family were deported to Terezstadt, where he helped the inmates cope with the horror of their fates. He watched his own father die there. In his book Man In Search Of Meaning he writes: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing – the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way... The sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of the camp's influences alone... Human freedom is not freedom from conditions, but freedom to take a stand toward the conditions."

I have watched so many of you affirm the wisdom of Dr. Frankl's teaching. How you have channeled your own grief into helping others. How you have taken the lessons you have learned from your own dark times and alleviated the fears, and granted hope, to your friends and neighbors, and even complete strangers.

How you have welcomed the support and compassion your friends and neighbors have offered, instead of "toughing it out" and trying to go it alone. You have taught that vulnerability and humility are not signs of weakness; they are, rather, the first step toward achieving wholeness and healing and even joy again.

*Atem Nitzvim hayom kulchem lifnei Adonai Eloheychem::*

“You stand *today*, all of you, before the Lord your God,” that’s how tomorrow morning’s Torah reading begins, “ the covenant which the Lord your God is concluding with you *today*” –

“to establish you *today* as his people” –

“with those with us *today* and those not here *today*” –

”the instruction which I enjoin upon you *today*” –

“I set before you *today* life and prosperity, death and adversity and so on....

Seven times we will hear the word *hayom*, the word *today* in the very first verses of our Torah reading. Seven times. I think the Torah is trying to teach us that today is all we have. Today is all we know. Tomorrow is a mystery, veiled behind the limits of our reach. We pray that tomorrow will be a wonderful day. But none of us is immune from the possibility of tragedy. None of us has the luxury of knowing the number of our days. And yet, proclaims the Torah, no matter the circumstances we face, *u’vacharta b’chaim*, we have to choose life. Not in some “*seize the day*,” throw all caution to the wind and feed my impulsive cravings way of choosing. Not at all. *Choose life*, means understanding the blessings that surround us now, and nourishing them, and appreciating them.

But if we squander today. If we let it pass by focusing on the truly insignificant, allowing superficiality to distract us, to make our blood boil; if we waste today’s hours, intoxicated by our supposed need for more and more things. If we spoil our bonds with our families by being impatient, judgmental or neglectful---we may never have another chance to make it right, leaving us full of regret.

Someone facing a health scare once said to me: “You know rabbi; I’m still doing all the things I need to do. Getting the kids ready for school. Schlepping them from place to place. My volunteer work. And everyone is perfectly nice and tries to be helpful. But then I hear about “this one” being angry at “that one” for where she was seated at a bar mitzvah. Or I hear some petty, nasty comment about someone. And I know that I used to be like that. Its like, when you’re healthy, you’re brainwashed with this sense of invincibility, that everything will always go on just as it is now. That everybody will be healthy and successful and happy. And then the world turns upside down, and you wonder why you wasted so much energy on all the nonsense you used to care about.”

It is a paradox of human existence that we tend to learn this important lesson only after a crisis strikes. Only when confronted with a serious threat to our health, or the health of someone we love. Only in tragedy or death. Only in the collapse of a marriage. That in those moments, and often only in those moments, do we realize how much time we have wasted. How much energy we have thrown away on such stupid and meaningless pursuits and petty grudges.

As you know, I spend a great deal of time with families preparing for funerals. And the two most gratifying statements loved ones share with me are: *Rabbi, nothing was left unsaid between us*, and *rabbi, he knew we loved him, and we know that he loved us*. Now, these affirmations have nothing to do with dying; they have nothing to do with funerals or shivas. Rather, they reflect a way of living; of sharing our lives in the everyday, of the constancy of our love made real, and rich, deep and meaningful, over years and decades. Not just when we're afraid we're about to lose everything, but on ordinary days, on boring days, on days when everything is just fine. The people who say these things to me lived in their relationships knowing that each day brings an opportunity for gratitude, for honesty and for renewing commitment. To paraphrase Rabbi Eliezar in the Talmud, live each day as if it were your last day, and you will not know regret.

And so Yom Kippur comes with its Books of Life and Death to challenge us take an honest accounting of our lives. And if we are wise, we will see Yom Kippur as an opportunity for re-ordering our priorities, learning to make the most of each moment, invigorating and deepening our relationships, placing humility and patience over the urge to judge and condemn. Our prayers throughout this sacred day will remind us that happiness doesn't come with triumphalism. Struggling to acquire more things won't make you happy; happiness doesn't equate with selfishness. Being right by making someone else wrong won't make you happy either.

Judaism teaches that to be truly happy is to be generous and caring; happiness comes in the recognition of the beauty and the goodness at every stage of life; it is the ability to find embers of blessing, even when we struggle in darkness. Happiness, in Jewish terms, isn't contingent on *mazal*, on a fairy tale life. It comes from journeying through life with our focus on what we have, on what is already pleasing and enduring in our worlds.

*Ayzehu asheer? Who is rich? asks Ben Zoma in the Talmud, Ha'same'ach b'chelko, the one who is happy with what he has.*

And so on this holiest of nights, we all stand before our God, naked and exposed, each with our own challenges and fears as we face the New Year. We will offer many prayers before the final Neilah blast of the shofar tomorrow evening. And what binds each prayer to the others is this:

Dear God, grant me strength that even when the burdens I carry wear me down, I might still recognize the blessings that guide and sustain me.

Dear God, grant me gratitude for the gift of life itself, that I am alive, sustained, and have reached this sacred day.

Dear God, grant me awareness that I never take for granted those who stand beside me in my life. My family and my friends and their acceptance, companionship and devotion. They teach me how to love and how to receive love.

Dear God, gather these prayers of thankfulness as they rise from my own heart and reach You, my Rock and my Shepherd. Amen



