**Yom Kippur in July 5776/2015**

Rabbi Julie Hilton Danan

**It was one of those years when baseball’s World Series coincided with Yom Kippur. One congregant was having serious spiritual struggles about the issue. Finally he went to the rabbi. “Rabbi,” he said, “I know that Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the Jewish year and that the *Kol Nidrei* prayer is something that every Jew tries to be there for. But this year there’s a crucial World Series game on television that very same night and I don’t know what to do.”**

**The rabbi didn’t get upset, but said, “That’s what they invented DVR’s for.”**

**The congregant replied in joyful amazement: “You mean I can tape Kol Nidrei?”**

**Many of the readings that we read each year at PCS on the Days of Awe come from a book, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared,* by the late Rabbi Alan Lew. Rabbi Lew picked up on the fact that “Yom Kippur often takes place against the backdrop of either the baseball playoffs or the World Series itself.” It’s ironic, because as he notes, “Baseball is a religion of winning. We identify with a team, and when they win we feel a lift—we feel as if we have won…Even fans of perennial losers (a religion in itself) or those rare and true fans who appreciate loss for the depth of feeling it provokes…**

**begin with a yearning to win. Otherwise there would be nothing to lose in the first place.**

**“Yom Kippur, on the other hand, is all about losing. Losing nobly, perhaps, but losing nonetheless.” He explains that mature life involves a series of losses. In the course of the long life to which we all aspire, we are bound to lose relationships, experienced the death of loved ones, suffer health problems, grow more fragile with age, and often find our youthful dreams unrealized or somehow disappointing in their fruition.**

**But, he continues, “There is…one human capacity that actually increases, that grows stronger and deeper as we grow older, and that is wisdom. And the reason that wisdom increases as we age is that the source of all wisdom is precisely our death. As we approach death, we approach wisdom.” Rabbi Lew gives the examples of biblical heroes as well as his own clients in hospice care who achieved a kind of overarching vision of their own life precisely as they faced its limits. They often experienced a deep ability to bless and to transmit love, because they had to ask themselves, “Who am I? What is my life really about?” “To lose nobly,” he writes, is to answer that question [about the meaning of our lives] in time to move toward that core [of our values] while we are still alive.” But sometimes people make the realization of what was important when it is too late to make any fundamental changes. Yom Kippur gives us a chance to confront the big questions while there is still time to make changes and heal relationships.**

It was around the 4th of July, three years ago, as my dear husband Avraham lay in the intensive care unit after suffering a major stroke. We decided to cheer him by playing some music on his iPhone. We enjoyed listening to albums by our friend Yuval Ron’s ensemble. As we were sitting there one afternoon with several family members close by, we heard Yuval’s arrangement of the melody to Kol Nidrei, which is sung in the album as a plaintive and wordless *niggun* by one of his female soloists.

Some members of the family immediately had a negative reaction: please turn down that sad melody! But to me it seemed extremely appropriate. We were experiencing Yom Kippur in July. Being in a life crisis can have a similar effect to Yom Kippur, forcing us to reevaluate our lives and reconsider what is truly important to us.

In Jewish tradition, you can feel a sense of Yom Kippur at other times of the year, not just the 10th of Tishrei. One of the classic examples is a wedding! On the surface, a wedding would seem to have little in common with Yom Kippur, but it is in fact traditional for bride and groom to fast their wedding day prior to the ceremony, and in some communities for the groom to wear a kittel, the same garment worn on Yom Kippur.

Because the couple is embarking on a new life together, tradition considers it a time when they are forgiven all their sins and their prayers for others are especially efficacious.

Of course, the traditional rituals surrounding death are also very similar to Yom Kippur, or vice-versa. A person who is near death, passing from one world to the next is supposed to recite the *vidui*, or confession of sins, or to have it recited for him, and to say the Shema in the same we way say it at the end of Ne’ilah.

Indeed, the Days of Awe, the High Holy Days, are powerful precisely because they are in some sense recreations of major life-cycle events. These days resonate with themes of birth and of death, and bid us to confront life’s most fundamental questions: What are we doing here? What is the meaning of our life? What is our legacy?

Rosh Hashanah is the day of birth, considered in tradition the day that God created the first human being. It is Yom Harat Olam, the day of conception of a new world, a new beginning in life. We read stories of Biblical mothers Hagar, Sarah, Hannah and Rachel, and we hear the call of the shofar like the wails of a baby. The round bread, honey, and bursting fruits are life affirming and sweet. We do tashlich by natural waters, a symbol of life.

By contrast Yom Kippur has many themes of mortality and rehearsing death: including fasting and abstaining from physical pleasures, and wearing shroudlike white or even the kittel, an actual shroud. Yom Kippur is a time that we think about the big questions in life, which include our own mortality. As Woody Allen said, “I’m not afraid of my own death. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” But at some point, each of us is shaken from our denial. The illness or death of a loved one, tragic events or natural disasters make us face the fact that none of us will live forever. In case we want to avoid that realization, the High Holy Day liturgy reminds us: “All of humanity is founded on dust, like a dream that vanishes.”

Yom Kippur day is full of this type of contemplation. The traditional confessional prayers enact a kind of trial in which we consider that from a biblical standpoint we have transgressed capital crimes. We remember our own beloved departed ones at Yizkor, and in the Yom Kippur Martyrology, we recall the deaths of those who gave their lives to sanctify God’s name and thus we contemplate what values we hold dearer than life itself.

Finally, at the end of Ne’ilah, as the gates close, like a person on his or her deathbed we make our confession and symbolically pour out our souls with the words of the *Shema…*But then we get to blow the shofar, make havdalah, eat dinner and start all over again!

It reminds me of the story of a man who was shocked to open the morning paper and read his own obituary, printed by mistake. He immediately contacted the editor of the paper, who responded, “I’m sorry; we can’t offer a retraction for what was printed. But I can print you a new birth announcement tomorrow.” In a sense, this is what we go through on Yom Kippur. We imagine reading our own obituary, contemplate the sum of our lives…and we get to start again with a clean slate. As Reb Zalman says, Yom Kippur is a “non-fatal death” and our “new incarnation can begin today.”

None of this negates our hope for an afterlife. Judaism has embraced many views of the hereafter. If you believe in the survival of your soul in heaven (which Jews call *Gan Eden*)resurrection of the dead in some physical form at the end of days, or even a series of reincarnations (like the Kabbalists), you are well within the bounds of Jewish tradition. Or perhaps you are a modern rationalist and believe that we live on only in the lives of others or the deeds we perform. You can in fact, pick and choose among these afterlife concepts and still be a good Jew, because in Judaism, the focus is on this life. While other religions make eternal life the subject of their holiest days, Jews gather on the Days of Awe with the humble prayer that we merit one more year of this earthly existence. We are bidden to do our best at living this earthly life and making this world better, leaving the next world up to God.

If you have ever spoken to someone who survived a near-death experience, the salient fact is that it usually caused them to reevaluate the meaning of their life and to refocus on more spiritual values. With Yom Kippur, we don’t have to wait for such a crisis. **As Rabbi Lew wrote, “we Jews aren’t supposed to wait for the end to ask ourselves those [big existential] questions. We are supposed to ask them all the time, and especially on Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur urges us to ask them over and over again…What’s important? What is at the core of our life? …And what are we clinging to that isn’t important, that won’t endure, that isn’t worthy?... If not, we had better let go of [those things] now, before they become what we are, what we will always be…”**

**At Yom Kippur Yizkor, as we remember others, we ask ourselves how we want to be remembered: that we accumulated the most stuff, or that we left behind something beautiful and enduring because we gave so much away; that we were always too busy or that we always made time for our love ones; that we squandered our days impressing others or that we fulfilled the creative longings deep within our own souls.**

**So this Yom Kippur, I bless us all that we don’t have to wait for a personal crisis, our own Yom Kippur to come in July or at some other time of year, in order to focus on what is really important to us, what lies at the core of our lives.**

**Rather, let us take the next 24 hours to consider our values in life, our priorities, the relationships we need to heal, the legacies that we want to leave for our families, our community and our world. Let us consider whether we are currently living our lives and sharing our gifts each day of the year in ways that will make us remembered the way we want to be. Then when we blow the shofar and make havdalah, we can print ourselves a new birth announcement and make a new beginning, embark on the journey of a fresh New Year, full of possibilities and the joy of life. Amen.**